

# CONVERSATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY: SCHOOL READINESS IN MISSISSAUGA

A Report from the  
Community Knowledge Forum  
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Community Foundation of Mississauga  
1100 Central Parkway West, Unit 15, Lower Level, Mississauga, ON L5C 4E5  
p: 905-897-8880 f: 905-897-7509  
e: [info@CFofM.org](mailto:info@CFofM.org) w: [www.CFofM.org](http://www.CFofM.org)  
Charitable BN: 892395112 RR0001

## **Overview of the Foundation**

The Community Foundation of Mississauga is part of one of the fastest growing charitable movements in Canada. The Foundation is a registered charitable public foundation that was launched in spring 2001. Since that time, it has grown rapidly and has over \$20 million in endowed assets and cumulative grants of over \$6 million. Community foundations across Canada share three fundamental roles:

One: Endowment building/personalized service. The Foundation builds endowed and other funds to provide lasting support for local priorities. It makes giving easy and effective, accepting a wide variety of gifts and providing donors with a number of charitable options. Donors can contribute cash, stocks, property and other assets. Donors may establish a fund in their name or in the name of a loved one. In most cases, a gift qualifies for maximum tax advantage under federal law.

Two: Local grantmaking expertise. The Foundation's staff and volunteers have an in-depth understanding of the issues, opportunities, and resources that shape our community. It evaluates all aspects of community well-being – including social services, education, the environment, health care, youth, seniors and the arts and then makes grants to support the broadest range of community needs. It can help donors learn more about local organizations and programs that make a difference in areas they care about most.

Three: Community leadership. Because community foundations support all kinds of charities, it is well positioned to bring people and organizations together, convening diverse voices to address local issues and opportunities. The Foundation's business is building community.

## **Capturing Community Knowledge**

Bridging the needs of the community with philanthropy is at the heart of the Community Foundation of Mississauga. This includes building a base of knowledge about the issues affecting the community, bringing together the people who live and work in the city to hear what they have to say, connecting organizations serving the community, sharing information, identifying gaps and opportunities and considering innovative ideas that can be part of the solution to addressing community needs.

Collaborating is one of the ways a community foundation stays connected to the purpose we serve. It helps keep vital knowledge and communication flowing.

## **Trends and Statistics**

Why pursue school readiness as a topic for a Community Knowledge Forum? One of the roles of the community foundation is to examine areas considered critical to quality of life. The Community Foundation of Mississauga seeks to foster critical reflection and conversation around community well-being through our Mississauga's Vital Signs<sup>®</sup> report. In our most recent Vital Signs from 2013, multiple statistics speak to the well-being of Mississauga's children: Peel Region has the highest proportion of youth in the GTA, the growing gap between the rich and the poor disproportionately affects children and high housing costs and unemployment threaten families' quality of life.

This is not new. Our previous Community Knowledge Forum on Food Security explored the tangled convergence of economy, poverty, health, environment and well-being. Just as food affordability is directly related to family income and other household expenses, child well-being in Mississauga is deeply affected by the same factors. In the midst of all these factors, a troubling measurement stood out: "Over 30% of Peel Region preschoolers in 2010 measured as vulnerable in one or more measures of school readiness. Of this measure, 46% indicated that their first language was not the language of instruction in the classroom."

The Community Leadership Committee of the Community Foundation of Mississauga began to imagine hosting a Community Knowledge Forum with local professionals in the early childhood education sector that considered these three questions:

- As a community deeply invested in the well-being of our children, how we might we better understand and reflect upon this data?
- In the midst of challenging economic times, what does school readiness look like in Mississauga now?
- How might we as a community respond?

### **Sharing Knowledge and Expertise**

The presenters at the forum reflect the diversity of the early childhood education sector. Each spoke from a specific perspective related to their experiences with school readiness at the community level.

Presentations were made by Aimee Wolanski, Research Officer, Peel District School Board, who spoke to the use of the Early Development Instrument in Peel. Sara Ammar, Manager, Professional Education and Communications, Tenneil Dhaliwal, Communications and Outreach Specialist, and Ann Norris, Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator at Child Development Resource Connection Peel (CDRCP) talked about the changing vocabulary from “school readiness” to “life readiness” and how their programs reflected this change.

Pam Melin, Family Support Educator, and Karen Nish, Program Manager, from Mississauga Parent-Child Resource Centres (MPCRC) outlined the impact of positive attachments and self-regulation on child development and school readiness. Sandy Edmonds, VP Operations at PLASP Child Care Services discussed Peel Children and Youth Initiative and Success by 6 Peel, highlighting the important role of child care centres in early childhood learning. Lynn Hand, Executive Director at Family Education Centre, emphasized supporting parents while building a child's confidence and sense of responsibility in the early years.

The Community Foundation of Mississauga is grateful for the generous contributions of all the participants who shared their perspectives at this forum. Their valuable input serves as the basis of this report.

## Key Findings

### Looking at the Research

One of the first questions motivating this conversation is how we as a community might better understand the data around school readiness. The particular statistics in Vital Signs that served as a catalyst for this conversation were obtained through the Early Development Instrument (EDI). The EDI is a child well-being assessment administered before children begin grade one. Currently, all kindergarten teachers in Ontario complete 104 questions covering five domains: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge. The EDI helps educators get a sense of how vulnerable children are according to these domains.

To better understand what it means when over 30% of Peel Region preschoolers in 2010 measured as vulnerable in one or more measures of school readiness, it might be helpful to establish some context. Over 25% of Canada's kindergarten children are vulnerable. Peel Region's vulnerability is close to that of the province (28.5%). The five most challenging sub-domains in Peel Region are the following: gross and fine motor skills; prosocial and helping behavior; interest in literacy/numeracy and memory; advanced literacy skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. In Peel Region, boys tend to be more vulnerable than girls, especially with regard to social competence and emotional maturity. Further, vulnerability was 17.1% higher for English Language Learners within Peel District School Board.

What might account for this rate of vulnerability among the children of Peel Region across multiple measures? That answer is not simple. Within the forum, certainly income, family health and related stresses of a household were named as significant contributing factors to a child's capacity for learning. The relationship between social inequality and school readiness cannot be overstated. In our report on food security, the prevalence of precarious employment (40% of GTA residents) was named as influencing families' sense of security. High housing costs conspire with an overall environment of economic instability to impose stress upon working parents, which in turn impacts children. Also, Mississauga is second only to Toronto in welcoming new residents to the Greater Toronto Area. The high number of newcomer households in Mississauga brings the stress associated with parenting accompanied by the challenges of integration. The importance of supporting newcomers who are parents was expressed. One important strategy for responding to the challenges of social inequality is

the fostering of connections between parents. High quality early childhood programs grow parents' support networks and assist them in building the security that comes through social cohesion.

One of the most promising aspects of the EDI is the way in which its results are used on behalf of the community. Its measurements have helped obtain much needed funding for libraries, neighbourhood centres, programming and school initiatives. In Mississauga, examples include the Family Day Care Services, a program that introduced children to methods of managing their emotions, communicating them and understanding the emotions of others. The Learning in our Neighbourhood (LION) is a mobile program hosted by CDRCP, MPCRC and Malton Neighbourhood Services. LION provides early years services that encourage and gradually grow program leadership from parents with the goal of sustainable parent-lead groups. In Malton, there is Understanding the Early Years, a program for parents on child development, as well as the Malton Community Building Project, which fosters empowerment and leadership development in the black community.

### From School Readiness to Life Readiness

The second central question we sought to address is the present state of school readiness in Mississauga. The importance of preparing children for success in school was acknowledged. Despite parents sometimes undervaluing their role in the lives of their children, parents were named as the primary educators of their children. The role of all other educators is to support and work alongside families, offering information and services as needed.

Parents can grow in confidence through supports and education. Examples of the kind of parenting skills promoted by early childhood educators include asking about a child's day, modelling communication skills, creating time in the day for reflection, encouraging empathy, reading and singing with one's child, restricting television and technology use, and creating healthy routines around activity, eating, sleep and play. Educators also aim to dismantle barriers experienced by parents in accessing these kinds of supports, such as constraints of time, money, location, transportation, and awareness. Consider the Family Education Centre's move to online courses and podcasts for parents. These podcasts are delivered in the many languages spoken by the families of Peel Region.

Within this discussion, a re-framing of the work of early childhood education emerged: from school readiness to life readiness. The ambitious goal of the early childhood educator, working alongside

present in the Ontario Ministry of Education's document *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*. At its heart are four foundational conditions important for children to thrive throughout all their lives:

- Belonging: an experience of connectedness with others and world
- Well-Being: a holistic view of health that includes both the physical and mental
- Engagement: curiosity about others and the world leading to playful interaction
- Expression: complex communication through words, bodies, and materials

CDRCP named multiple examples of its programs reflecting this expansive vision of life readiness: literacy development; play that encourages mathematical capacity; and its Nurturing Leadership is Changing Hearts which builds leadership, self-regulation and development.

### Attachment

Another key theme that emerged in the midst of the conversation about reframing school readiness as life readiness was that of attachment. Attachment is a powerful, caring bond between a child and a caregiver who helps the child feel secure. Children use attachments to their caregivers as launching-off points from which to explore the world but return to these attachments for comfort and reassurance.

Presenters invited reflection on different styles of attachment between child and parent. A *secure* attachment allows parents to consistently respond to their child, thus allowing the child to feel safe and able to develop meaningful connections with others. A child trusts that his or her needs will be met, including their need to express negative emotions and have them be met with comfort.

Alternatively, *avoidant* attachments arise when a caregiver is disengaged. Here, a child may prefer the company of a stranger to their parent because the child doubts that his or her needs will not be met by their caregiver. A third kind of attachment is *ambivalent*. The child is highly anxious because the caregiver is inconsistent. The child cannot fully trust. Finally, *disorganized* attachment occurs when parents' behavior is extreme. In response, the child can exhibit depression, anger or passivity. Here the child is confused as to how his or her needs will be met.

Secure attachments with positive relationships result in children who are capable of self-regulation.

For young children, initially parents help regulate the child's emotions through reassurance. Over

time, a child develops the capacity to do this with greater independence. This means staying calm or focused, controlling one's impulses, understanding that different contexts invite different behavior, problem-solving and a capacity to tolerate frustration.

Self-regulation helps children be focused and alert during school and to learn to solve problems and interact in different situations. They are capable of reading people's cues and exercising empathy. Children with good self-regulation can follow directions more easily and get along with others. They are more ready for school and also relationship-building throughout life. The best early childhood education programs help families develop attachment and build self-regulation with their children to prepare both for school and life-long successful development.

MPCRC offered multiple examples of the way awareness of attachment is integrated throughout its programming. In an infant massage program, parents learn to read infant's cues and grow in confidence, while fostering a connection with their child. In another program, Infant Mother Goose, attachment is strengthened through play, song and rhyme. A program for fathers helps promote connection between men and their young children, while providing a supportive peer network.

### Collaboration

Another important theme from the forum was collaboration. As we listened, what became evident is that collaboration in the early childhood sector runs far deeper than partnership. It includes a fundamental way of thinking about child learning and development that privileges the role of the parent or primary caregivers. While holding parents at the center, early childhood education includes a close, supportive relationship between schools, community organizations, child care providers, libraries, and the community at large.

For example, the Peel Children Youth Initiative coordinates hundreds of partners in Peel Region to ensure children and youth up to 24 years old grow to their full potential. The work includes research, capacity building, system planning and youth advisement.

A representative from the Mississauga Library System spoke to the library's role in early childhood education. In stark contrast to the *past* practice of separating children from their parents during library programs, now the library actively encourages parents to attend all programs alongside their children. Some families now stay for hours at the library. What's more, one of the ways the environment of the



library itself is evolving is towards a play-based environment, also offering “maker-spaces” for film, photography, and recording studios.

## **Conclusions**

The rich conversation generated by the forum reveal an immense wealth of local programming in the early childhood education sector. It also invites deep reflection: how might we as a community respond, both to the research on school readiness and the outstanding ways the sector is serving the needs of children and families in Mississauga?

- Affirm parents, caregivers and families. Parenting is hard work. Parents need to be reaffirmed in their efforts and know they have support. Mistakes happen and that is normal.
- Support excellence in the sector. Quality programs are continuously adapting and evolving to remain fully responsive to the children and families they serve. This forum is a testament to the sustaining work happening right now in Mississauga by local early childhood educators.
- Tackle issues of affordable housing, livable wage, and program continuity. Early childhood education resides at the convergence of complex issues. The greatest possible impact is achieved when families are able to thrive across the many dimensions of well-being, including affordable housing, meaningful employment that pays a livable wage, nutritious food, healthcare and education. Strong existing networks need to be widened farther still to ensure that those most in need do not fall through the cracks.

A heartfelt thank you to our forum presenters and the organizations they represent for generating insightful discussion around the integral role school readiness in Mississauga plays in building a strong, healthy and sustainable community for our children and us all.

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