

Position Paper: The Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures Network

Shkimnoyaawin Niigaan Nikeyaa
Nishin Aagi Maagitang WiiNigan Bemaadizidina
Partir d'un bon pas pour un avenir meilleur



An integrated and responsive
model supporting implementation
of Best Start Child and Family Centres

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“The Better Beginnings Better Futures story expresses how a mobilized community and a collaborative network of service providers can make all the difference in the lives of families. In doing the Early Years Study, we saw and heard this directly from community participants.”

—J. Fraser Mustard¹

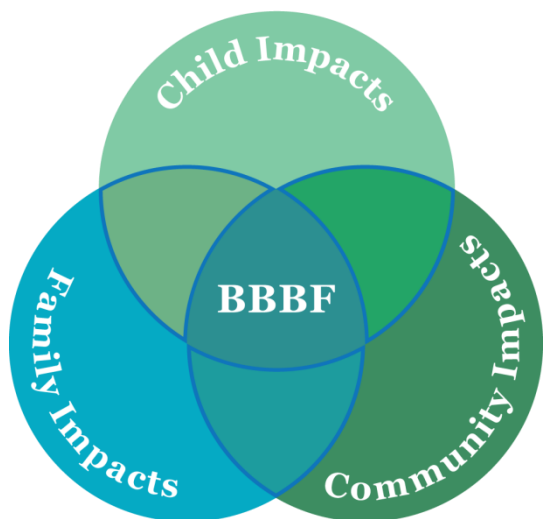
1. McCain, M. N., & Mustard, J. F. (1999). Reversing the real brain drain, early years study: Final Report. *Canadian Institute for Advanced Research*. Toronto, Canada.

The Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures Network:

Executive Summary

Better Beginnings Better Futures (BBBF) is an evidence informed approach in which government, service providers and residents work together to select or create programs to support child, family and community development. Our focus is on developing children to their full capacity by strengthening families and communities.

The Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures Network is comprised of **eight community hubs** offering programs and serving as navigators to children and families within high-risk communities across Ontario.



The Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures Network was founded in 1991 by the Government of Ontario as a **research platform**, which helped to inform Ontario's Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program and the establishment of Ontario Early Years Centres.

Better Beginnings Better Futures is community informed. We are founded in the belief that **parents and community leaders must be meaningfully and significantly involved** in many aspects of organization, management and delivery of the Better Beginnings Better Futures program model.



1. Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures: *Network*

The Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures Network (OBBBF Network) emerged from an ambitious research project on the long-term impacts of early childhood development programming.

Established in 1991 and comprised of eight diverse sites across Ontario, the OBBBF Network evolved from its original research mission — *improving developmental outcomes for children and young people in high risk neighbourhoods* -- to a robust network of community hubs providing integrated, community informed programs and services. While our programs are rooted in childhood development, we are well known as systems navigators, who empower neighbourhood leadership and connect local residents with service providers and professional helpers.

Aboriginal, francophone, bilingual, immigrant, rural, urban -- the strength of our network is its diversity. Individually, our sites offer community programs that are integral to the fabric of the neighbourhoods where we operate. Each of our communities represents a unique character and specific set of challenges underscoring the importance of replicating best practices. Together, with our community partners, our sites form a robust and skillful network, representative of Ontario's wider population.

The Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures Network Sites are located in: Cornwall, Etobicoke, Guelph, Kingston, Ottawa, Sudbury, Toronto, Walpole Island.

Looking Forward

Our network advantage is our shared 25-year history, the strength of our communications and the potential to re-cast our mission in terms of understanding the role and potential of community hubs, how they are established, their program deployment, and how community based action research and practice can continually improve service delivery.

We embrace the vision of a province-wide partnership and an integrated system of child and family services. We seek to deepen our partnership with the Government of Ontario to realize the OBBBF Network's potential.



2. Better Beginnings, Better Futures: *Discovery*

The Government of Ontario originally designed Better Beginnings Better Futures sites as a research platform to better understand how specialized programs and services can wrap around disenfranchised populations while partnering with other organizations. The formation of the idea came from the results of the 1980's report, Ontario Child Health Study.

Better Beginnings Better Futures was the first long-term prevention model in Canada to look longitudinally at two case-control cohorts: a prenatal to 4 years cohort and a 4 to 8 years cohort. Enhanced parenting competence and favourable living environments resulted in children entering school with the same potential as children not living in vulnerable communities¹.

“We know there is potential in everyone. We see it every day in the people working and striving to get a good start in life, to raise a family and to contribute to their communities. Children growing up in poverty, have the innate potential of youth. Individuals starting over in a new country see great potential to contribute to their new homeland. Adults going back to school, perhaps after a layoff, are renewing their potential. People recovering from mental illness or addiction are rediscovering their potential. Poverty has many faces, and there are countless circumstances that lead to poverty. But we know there is one overarching path out of poverty: realizing this human potential.”

—Deb Matthews, Deputy Premier
Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2014

Today, in partnership and collaboration with others, we offer developmental and intergenerational programming to families and children from prenatal to 99 years. This includes multi-tiered service and ongoing support to ensure early positive outcomes and favourable long-term impacts across the network. In addition to the services offered by our sites, we are each navigators of the relevant services available within our communities. Our experience shows an asymmetry to how and when families access our support. This underpins our understanding of how community hubs respond in real time to the unique needs of the children, the families and the communities accessing our services.

The Ontario Better Beginning Better Futures Network hubs have been early adopters of peer-based programming supporting better outcomes for parents. The model delivers increased credibility and connectivity as well as supporting and coaching positive interactions with their children.



¹ Ontario. (2014). *Realizing our potential: Ontario's poverty reduction strategy, 2014-2019*.
www.ontario.ca/povertyreduction

Proven Results

From data analysis on prenatal to 4 year and 4 to 8 year old cohorts

For Children

- More timely immunizations by 18 months of age.
- Greater self-control and conflict management in early adolescence.
- Less drug use/violence/theft in the neighbourhoods with late adolescents.
- Early identification of need allows children to get help earlier.
- Higher average secondary school grades.

For Parents and Families

- Greater social support, improved family functioning, less alcohol use.
- Greater sense of community involvement and neighbourhood cohesion.
- More frequent use of preventive social and health services.

For Teachers

- Less hyperactivity/inattention, better communication skills, and improved general knowledge in their students

For Community Members

- Enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence and sense of ownership in their neighbourhood.

Looking Forward

The Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures Network was founded in research and continues to provide valuable opportunities to track and monitor outcomes of child and parent programs, to respond to community need, and to adapt and improve service models.

The indicators we report on reflect our commitment to wellbeing, expression, engagement, and belonging as the four essential strands of the Ontario Ministry of Education's "How Learning Happens".

We seek a renewed investment from the Government of Ontario to realize our potential as a valuable and experienced community action research partner.



3. Better Beginnings Better Futures: *Community Informed*

Engaging families and their surrounding community as important stakeholders in providing a safe, nurturing environment is key to childhood development and wellbeing. Ontario communities need programs that are linguistically, socially and culturally accessible and integrated with other local services. Better Beginnings Better Futures sites leverage rather than duplicate the unique assets of our community members and local organizations.



“We work to strengthen local leadership so residents have a voice, as an invested stakeholder, to influence the decisions that impact their quality of life and that of their children.”

—Parents for Better Beginnings
Regent Park Community Health Centre
Better Beginnings Better Futures, Toronto



A distinctive aspect of Better Beginnings Better Futures sites is our shared governance model – at least 51% of decision makers are parents and community residents. We seek meaningful and significant parent and community leader involvement in many aspects of the organization and delivery of programs. Community stakeholder involvement in program planning, design and delivery breaks down barriers and ensures young children and their families have access to programs and services that are equally responsive, respectful, diverse, inclusive, and represent the value systems of each community. We have grown with our ever-changing communities – the size and nimbleness of our network keeps us relevant and our sites are well-respected service providers in each community.

To whom it may concern:

I write this letter to highlight ways in which BBBF has positively impacted my life. The support and opportunities their programs provided me have proven invaluable. When I was in junior kindergarten, I was a very quiet child and the fact that I kept to myself did not go unnoticed. A BBBF staff member recognized the need to bring me out of my shell and provide educational support for both myself and my family, so we started having home visit sessions. Every day, I would sit by the windows at the front of my house waiting for her to arrive, excited to learn new things and tell her about the intricacies of what mattered to my 4 year old self. She drew out the side of me that was passionate about education, and that desire to learn has stuck with me since.

Years later, I found myself working alongside her and the other incredible staff at BBBF, in the kindergarten readiness program. What started as a high school volunteer experience turned into a 4 year long eye-opener. Working with the communities' children and seeing the impact of BBBF's programs on vulnerable populations in dire need of social welfare projects was inspiring, and in many ways influenced the decisions I made about higher education. Now, as a first year law student at Osgoode Hall Law School and a pro bono volunteer at Rexdale Community Legal Clinic, I strive to provide the same type of support to low-income and working class communities that BBBF gave me. I believe in paying positivity forward, and in many ways, I owe BBBF for showing me that the greatest tool one can have to better themselves and empower others is education.

—Arthika, former participant, Etobicoke

Looking Forward

The Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures Network offers a unique collective of adaptive, accessible, community informed initiatives aimed towards the same goal: providing wrap-around support for our community's children to live up to their fullest potential.

We seek the Government's renewed investment for multi-year, multi-sectoral funding to strengthen our focus on developing children, assisting their families and empowering their communities.



4. Better Beginnings Better Futures: *Navigation*

Better Beginnings Better Futures staff and volunteers work with children and parents, making important connections to wider social supports in the community. A crucial component to our successful model is linking families and community members to other services and agencies in our networks: providing healthy food access and literacy, preventive health programs, mental health supports, recreational facilities, transportation, legal and justice supports, settlement services, income tax assistance, education and training, social housing, income and employment supports. Our high quality, universal programs in targeted neighbourhoods for children and families bring community members through our doors. Our expertise as systems navigators bring them back again and again if and when they need additional supports. We reach out and build relationships within communities because it is the most effective way to support vulnerable children and their families.

Our sites exist as *de facto* community hubs. We provide services and programs, we advocate for community members and we assist individuals and families to navigate support systems. Within our neighbourhoods, our model is universal, holistic, ecological, and community-based.

“For many families, there are struggles with income, language barriers, adapting to a new country and way of life, lack of education (life skills and academics), parenting challenges, etc. I was amazed when I was connected with OW-BBBF and discovered that every child can be fed to start the day off right and have a brain fuelled for the school day, parents can have guidance and support to help with their challenges, children have after school activities, women can come together to share and learn in a safe environment, recreation is available for adults too.”

Families from all different nations come together to grow produce at the community garden plots. Truly, I have never seen anything like this. I am very grateful, not only for myself, but for the entire area, that there is such a helpful, caring and supportive organization. Another really cool thing about it is the effort that not only the staff, but also volunteers, exert. Everyone works together for a common goal. Overall, I would say that the benefit of all the programs, etc. provided is the very strong sense of community that is created in our area. It is as if we are all members of the same family.” —Parent, Better Beginnings Better Futures Guelph

Looking Forward

The Ontario Better Beginnings Better Futures Network is a leader in community resource navigation, well positioned to share how we have evolved, and eager to measure the outcomes of enhanced integration of services, on young children and families over time. Our network offers an opportunity to investigate “best practices” and monitor impacts of broad community-wide integration efforts.

We seek to assist the Government of Ontario as a community integration partner, to inform strategy and policy and help other Ontario communities meet the needs of vulnerable children, families and communities.

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