

Early Childhood Community Coalition of Greater Victoria

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Parents provide the most influential environment for a child during their early years. In addition to biological makeup, a child's life long health and well-being depends on a safe, stimulating environment that includes a nurturing family. A recent research study shows us that although Canadian parents (92%) believe their role is very important, their confidence in their own knowledge is low. We also know that only half of Canadian parents believe nurturing influences their child's brain development – a fact we know to be true.¹ Supported by these facts and the expertise and experience of our own community we know we must improve education and support to parents.

The Greater Victoria Early Childhood Community Coalition is proud to present these important messages from parents. This is a report of a series of focus groups conducted by Magellan Research to find out where parents of young children (under 6 years) go for parenting education, information and support. The report also includes what services parents would prefer to receive on parenting education, information and support. This is one part of our local research into parenting education and support opportunities in Greater Victoria and the beginning of our goal to improve parenting knowledge and support in our community. Important messages from these 44 parents provide us with good place to begin to develop our understanding.

A comprehensive process of community meetings, which used local and national research, and the expertise of our community identified 12 themes and 3 priority areas for immediate action. The coalition identified parenting education and support as one of our three priorities areas this year. A task group working on the priority of parent education and support identified three first step goals. They are:

1. To develop a comprehensive understanding of parent education, information and support in Greater Victoria.
2. To look at existing research and evaluation of what has already been done to educate and support parents.
3. To map current programs and opportunities and identify gaps.

We engaged Magellan Research through a competitive process, and are delighted to share this focus group report they completed for us.

We hope you will find this information compelling, and that it will provide the basis for discussion and action on this important issue. If you would like to know more about the work of our coalition, or would like to join us I would be happy to hear from you.

Sincerely,

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¹ A National Survey of Parents of Young Children, Invest in Kids, 2002



**Greater Victoria Early Childhood
Community Coalition Focus Group Report**

April 2004

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Date: April 12th, 2004

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1 BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The Greater Victoria Early Childhood Community Coalition (the “Coalition”) is a group of service providers representing multiple agencies, sectors and professions working together to improve the health and well-being of children under 6 in the Greater Victoria region. The Coalition, established nearly 18 months ago, has developed a Community Plan with three areas of priority for immediate action:

- Parent education and knowledge;
- Community awareness of early childhood development; and
- Childcare.

The Coalition commissioned Magellan Research Inc. to conduct exploratory research to understand a range of issues pertaining to parent education and support services in the Greater Victoria region.

The primary objectives of this research were to:

- Identify where parents currently access parenting information, programs and services;
- Understand what information, programs and services parents want and need; and
- Determine how parents might prefer to receive parenting and/or child development information and from whom.

2 RESEARCH APPROACH

Qualitative research in the form of mini focus groups (‘mini-groups’) was undertaken with parents of children under the age of 6 years. Mini-groups consist of 6-person groups rather than the more traditional 10-12 person focus groups. Mini-groups were preferred over the larger group size because smaller groups provide a more comfortable environment for participants to share in-depth or personal information. In addition, we wanted to reach a number of geographical areas within the Greater Victoria region.

A total of 8 groups were conducted in the following areas:

- Salt Spring Island – 1 group.
- Westshore including the communities of Langford, Colwood, Sooke and Metchosin– 3 groups.
- Victoria and surrounding municipalities – 4 groups.

Forty-four (44) participants attended the group sessions.

A broad spectrum of participants attended the groups including single parents, full-time stay-at-home parents, working professionals, a First Nations person and different ethnic groups, a member of the military, parents with between one and four children (including parents of twins), a person parenting the child of a relative, younger and older parents, and parents of children with learning and physical disabilities.

A number of what might be termed 'higher risk' parents were included in the groups. These participants self-identified themselves as having various challenges and struggles such as:

- Single parents on income assistance who are struggling to deal with the aftermath of separation or divorce and raising a child (or children) on their own with limited support;
- Young, low income parents who feel ill-equipped to parent children and who are accessing specific programs targeted to high risk parents.
- Parents with no support network or family support, including those who said they experienced "lonely pregnancies" and subsequent feelings of depression.

Participants were recruited by:

1. Random telephone calls to households in the Greater Victoria region, and
2. Posters were placed in various public locations (e.g. libraries, grocery stores, public notice boards, notice boards at several preschools, recreation centres) asking for parents to participate in a research study on parenting.

Participants were screened to ensure they met the recruiting criteria (i.e. notably that they had children in the right age range). All but one of the participants was female.

2.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings presented in this report provide a summary of the opinions and thoughts expressed by participants. In reading the report, readers should keep in mind that results of qualitative focus groups are exploratory and directional in nature. Due to the limited number of participants and the qualitative nature of the discussion, findings may not be representative of all parents of children under 6 years of age in the Greater Victoria region.

3 KEY FINDINGS

The following provides a summary of key findings from the research.

3.1 Awareness of Organizations Providing Parent Education and Support

When asked to think of organizations or groups that provide parenting or child development information or services to parents (or expectant parents), the most commonly mentioned organizations were:

- Public Health Units.¹
- Neighbourhood Houses.
- Recreation centres and the YW/YMCA.
- Midwives and doulas.
- Victoria Best Babies.
- La Leche League.
- Libraries.
- Single Parent Resource Centre.
- Separation and Divorce Centre.
- The Ministry of Children and Family Development.
- Queen Alexandra Centre for Children's Health.
- The Cridge Centre for the Family.

Other organizations/groups mentioned less often were the:

- The Twins and Triplets Society.
- Bridges for Women.
- Ledger House.
- The Native Friendship Centre.
- UBC Child and Family Medicine Department.
- University of Victoria Child Care Centre.
- Military Family Resource Centre.
- Pacific Centre.
- Church groups.
- BC Nurses Hotline.
- Vancouver Island Cooperative Preschool Association.

¹ As an aside, with one or two exceptions, participants in this research referred to the Vancouver Island Health Authority as the "CRD." The exceptions were when it was referred to as the Capital Health Region. Only one person referred to the Vancouver Island Health Authority.

Although participants were aware of a number of organizations or groups that they think offer parenting education, child development information or support services for parents, many had not accessed any program or services through these organizations and were therefore unfamiliar with what they offer. An example of this is the Cridge Centre for the Family and the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

3.2 Usage of Organizations and Programs

Participants were asked about the organizations and programs they have accessed to obtain information or support in their parenting experience. The organizations mentioned on Salt Spring Island are somewhat idiosyncratic to that location, while the responses from the Victoria and Westshore areas are similar among the communities.

Salt Spring Island

On Salt Spring Island there was unanimous agreement that midwives are the most valuable source of (unbiased) information about pregnancy, birthing and caring for a child. After the midwife's role is complete, the Public Health Unit becomes the next source of information, education and support. The Baby Talk program is a well-known and apparently well-utilized program on Salt Spring Island.

At the same time, a more informal support network of parents is also available through drop-in play groups at the Family Place Community Centre, the community's Gospel Church, other casual groups organized by parents and even the local children's book and art supply store – Fables Cottage – which makes available any free information on parenting and child development (including *Island Parent*) and is an informal gathering place for parents and their children.

Salt Spring Island appears to be a little different from other communities included in this research; participants said they relied more on their informal social network for support and advice – a social network that parents actively develop on their own initiative. In fact, according to participants, it was not uncommon for parents to start parent and tot groups in their own homes and operate these for several years.

“Salt Spring is very community oriented. It is so open. I can walk up to someone on the street with kids and ask questions about parenting. We are willing to help each other out. I don't ever feel afraid to talk about parenting and kids.” (Salt Spring Island Participant)

Another resource mentioned by most participants in Salt Spring Island is Cindy Clark, a psychologist, who is active in promoting women’s circles and is otherwise instrumental in providing advice on issues such as raising children and relationships. Cindy is viewed as an expert to turn to for advice on behavioural and emotional issues of raising children.

Victoria and Westshore Communities

In Victoria and the surrounding municipalities (including the Westshore), Public Health Units and service providers (especially neighbourhood houses) of programs such as Best Babies and Baby Talk are often the first and most important sources of information. Participants are accessing these programs for health information (immunization, dental care, breastfeeding, hearing tests, nutrition, child development information, postpartum depression etc) and getting answers to general questions about a baby’s health, welfare and development.

“Baby Talk through the Public Health Unit [was the] biggest source of information during the early stages. I used it for both kids. I was bursting to know what was happening...are my kids off track. It has very relevant topics.” (Victoria Participant)

“Higher risk” parents in the focus groups were also aware of programs like Nobody’s Perfect and Best Families and access these programs readily, primarily through Neighbourhood Houses or the Native Friendship Centre.

“I get everything I need from midwives...information on health, depression, care, everything.”
(Westshore Participant)

Midwives are also a valuable educational and support resource, although fewer participants in the Westshore and Victoria groups had used a midwife or doula during their pregnancy.

To supplement the programs noted above, parents also attend drop-in activities at neighbourhood houses and other community or recreation centers (whatever is most conveniently located to their homes). Casual drop-in programs play a critical role for parents. Not only do they provide a social outing and something interesting for their children to do, they also serve to develop a support network for parents (outside of the drop-in times and places) and a safe place to ask questions and learn from others about how to better parent their child.

“Neighbourhood houses are awesome.”
(Westshore Participant)

Neighbourhood houses are highly regarded among those who are aware of them. However, less than half of those in the groups had heard of these community resources with the Esquimalt Neighbourhood House and the James Bay Community Project appearing to be best known.

Single parents also utilize programs and support services through the Single Parent Resource Centre, such as Parenting and Life skills courses and Stress and Anger Management groups.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development is principally used as a referral mechanism to appropriate community resources. According to some participants, though, the Ministry is considered:

”The last resort...the last ditch end-of-the-road place for help. They work with you to get resources to help keep your child in the home. They send you to the right people.” (Westshore participant)

The Queen Alexandra Centre for Children’s Health is considered to fulfill the role of providing specialized services for children with needs for enhanced services (e.g. those with autism or a physical disability).

3.3 What Other Resources are Parents Using?

In addition to Public Health Units and community resources such as neighbourhood houses and community and recreation centers, the most universally used resources by parents are other parents and the *Island Parent* magazine.

Other Parents

“I like to ask lots of people and then make up my own mind. I consult many sources, collect many opinions, digest this and then decide on a course of action.” (Salt Spring Island Participant)

Many participants consider other parents a critical source of information. Friends with children form a social support network and a mechanism through which one learns about how others parent and what to do (and what not to do) in various situations. Many participants said they seek the advice of parents with children just a little older (6 months to a year) than their own children because they feel these parents have lived through the stage of development their children are going through and are best positioned to answer their questions.

Parents are consulted because the information and advice they give is “real life” and not necessarily prescriptive of how things should be.

“It’s free, it’s available, and it’s everywhere.” (Westshore Participant)

“It’s free and it’s local.” (Salt Spring Island Participant)

“Magazines make me feel inferior as a parent. They tell you to never raise your voice with children. This is so unrealistic for someone with 5 children.” (Westshore Participant)

“A group is less threatening. One-on-one is more evaluative and zoning in more on you.” (Victoria participant)

“[In a group] you find out you are not alone.” (Victoria participant)

Island Parent Magazine

Island Parent is considered the “bible of parenting information” and listings of support groups and community activities for children. Nearly all participants said they read *Island Parent*, with the Calendar of Family Events being most popular because parents are looking for ideas on (free) things to do with their children. Columns by Susan Miller, Alison Miller, the recipes and prevention tips are also popular components of the magazine.

Island Parent is so heavily used and appreciated because it is free, local and widely distributed. It is well-regarded because it has “unbiased, down-to-earth and real information” about parenting and “real stories about real moms and dads.” It has also become a trusted source of information for participants in the Greater Victoria region.

- **Other magazines** are also read such as:
 - Today’s Parent.
 - Mother Magazine.
 - Parenting Today.

These magazines are not as widely read as *Island Parent* and one of the reasons cited for this is that these magazines sometimes make participants feel inferior.

Other Resources Utilized

- **Courses, Workshops and Group seminars.** Participants mentioned a number of courses, workshops and/or group presentations they had attended. The Public Health Units, Neighbourhood Houses, Recreation and Community Centres, the Single Parent Resource Centre, Churches and various private sector providers organized some of these.

Everyone agreed they would rather participate in group based courses because it gives them an opportunity to learn from others, share “real” stories, ask questions and hear how others might deal with the situation, and generally benefit from the knowledge, experience and opinions of other parents like themselves.

“Doctors don’t always know what to do. I went to the Internet and then back to the doctor.”
(Westshore Participant)

“Doctors don’t take you seriously. “Oh silly Mom, first time Mom, overreacting over a paper cut.”“
(Victoria Participant)

“I turn to books and take bits and pieces from each of them and decide what to do.” (Victoria Participant)

- The topics covered in these courses varied but included:
 - Parenting skills;
 - Nutrition;
 - In-home and child safety;
 - Immunization;
 - Dental care;
 - Depression;
 - Toilet training; and
 - Discipline.
- **Physicians** are consulted for medical advice rather than for advice about parenting or child development, and generally only when the urgency of the situation dictates.

It was noted in the groups that parents want to be more proactive and knowledgeable about their child’s health so they are turning to the Internet for information often before they consult their physician.

A small number of parents in the groups expressed an opinion that doctors can come across as condescending to new parents by being nonchalant about a parent’s concerns for their child.

- **Books** are often one of the first things pregnant women (and men) and new parents turn to for information. Upon finding out they are pregnant, participants told us they immediately went into an information gathering phase on everything about having and caring for a baby. Their thirst for knowledge appeared to be insatiable as they prepare emotionally and physically for what lies ahead.

The books being read by participants included:

- The “What to Expect” series.
- Raising Your Spirited Child.
- Failure to Connect.
- The Highly Sensitive Child.
- The Worried Child.
- How Much is Enough.
- Above All, Be Kind.
- The Mother’s Almanac.
- Bringing Up Boys.
- The Baby Book.

- Your Baby and Child.
- Pregnancy, Child and the Newborn.
- The Discipline Book.

The “What to Expect” Series is most widely recognized and used by participants in this research. What is well-liked about this series of books is the way in which the information is presented by developmental milestones.

“I like the month by month what should be happening, what might be happening, when to do checkups...the encyclopedia of information. What’s a good diet? Is my child ahead of schedule?” ((Westshore Participant)

- **Websites** are accessed to see what activities and events are going on for children in the local community, for age appropriate development information, and as a source of information about health, behavioural issues and consumer information (e.g. how to discipline a child, information on diseases, and consumer reports on various products). Top-of-mind sites were:
 - KidsinVictoria.com
 - Islandparent.ca
 - Babycenter.com
 - Baby.com
 - Parentsplace.com
 - Child.com
- **Toll-free telephone services.**
 - Dial-a-dietitian for nutrition advice (e.g. when to introduce new foods).
 - BC Nurses Hotline for advice on what to do for various ailments and when to seek medical help.
- **Television.**
 - Dr. Phil – for advice on disciplining a child and other behavioural issues.
 - Real life parenting programming on KCTS (public television in the US)
- **Early Childhood Educators** through Pre-schools for child development information.

- **Videos** on various topics available through libraries.
- **Churches.** Various churches offer parental classes with guest speakers on various topics such as nutrition, positive discipline and home schooling, for example.
- **La Leche League** for breastfeeding and parenting information.
- **The Native Friendship Centre** for parenting groups and one-on-one counseling services.
- **Pacific Centre** for counseling and referral services.
- **Other Resources.**
 - Susan Miller – Perinatal Education and Breastfeeding Information.
 - Alison Miller and Allison Rees - L.I.F.E. (Living in Families Effectively) Seminars.
 - Carole Arndt – Breastfeeding products and advice.
 - Cindy Clark (Salt Spring Island – offers a support group for parents at risk of abusing their children).

3.4 Information, Program and Service Gaps

Parents want and need all of the programs and services already offered by service providers noted earlier. However, there are a number of areas where parents would like more support either in the form of information (print materials or web accessible information), workshops/presentations and/or programs.

Information Needs

Participants suggested a number of areas where they felt they needed more information, including:

- How to positively discipline without raising one's voice, spanking or damaging a child's self-esteem.
- Learning how to deal with behavioural issues such as bullying and temper tantrums.
- Unbiased and non-judgmental information about the pros and cons of issues such as circumcision and immunization.
- Different parenting styles and how to co-parent a child when each partner has differing parenting styles and experience.
- How to blend families when each partner brings children to the new relationship.
- Learning how to help children deal with traumas such as separation or divorce in the family.
- Child safety tips on things like appropriate ways to deal with strangers and learning how to deal with the emotional strain of worrying about keeping children safe.
- Nutrition information - at what stage of development/age should new foods be introduced and what foods to introduce. In addition, more information about a healthy diet for children, which covers all of the food groups, is desired.
- Sibling rivalry (e.g. managing more than one child).

“Discipline is a big issue. How do I discipline my child in a way that is respectful?”
(Westshore Participant)

“There are varying viewpoints on things like spanking and yelling at your children. It is hard to determine what is accurate and you can't ask anyone. I'm afraid it is going to open up a big fat can of worms. I'm afraid they're [Ministry of Children and Family Development] going to come and investigate me. You don't know what's going to happen...and people will think badly of me and [say] “Oh, she hits her children.” It's a really touchy subject.”
(Westshore Participant)

- Strategies for teaching children to sleep through the night.
- How to appropriately answer “big” questions such as “Am I going to die?” or questions about sex.
- What parents can do to facilitate cognitive development and emotional balance.
- Prenatal health issues such as gestational diabetes and the role of diet during pregnancy.

As an observation from the groups, both higher risk and what may be termed ‘mainstream’ participants desired greater support in the above areas. ‘Mainstream’ participants, irrespective of whether their pregnancy was planned or not, appeared just as scared, overwhelmed and/or needing of information about parenting as higher risk parents. In fact, it appeared that higher risk parents had better access to, if not awareness of, the variety of resources that are available for parents.

In addition, single, young and/or ‘at risk’ parents appeared to be more aware of and knowledgeable about the programs and services offered through the various Neighbourhood Houses (including things such as the provision of vitamins, transit vouchers and food programs). Those who were not aware of these programs were surprised they existed and thought they might like to visit their Neighbourhood House. There did not appear to be a perception that Neighbourhood Houses were only for ‘at risk’ persons.

Program and Service Needs

Participants cherish programs such as Baby Talk, Best Babies, Best Families, Nobody’s Perfect, counseling services and drop-in parent and tot times acknowledging the support these programs provide for them and their child. According to participants, though, most of these programs and services are designed for parents with children under the age of 3 (and even under 2).

Participants with older children lamented how few programs and support services there are for parents with children between the ages of 3 and 5. While it was recognized that older children start going to kindergarten and other preschool programs at this age, these programs were only for short time periods – usually once or twice a week for a couple of hours.

**“There are not a lot of programs for older kids.”
(Westshore Participant)**

Participants with children in the 3 to 5 age range want programs that allow them to answer many of their information needs outlined above.

In addition, access to these programs and services is principally during regular business hours. Working parents expressed frustration at not being able to utilize these programs and services and are often left to access resources that are available 24/7. For many, this meant relying upon the Internet, friends and books (although some said they were too tired at the end of the day to read or search the Internet).

3.5 Preferred Information Sources

Based on feedback from parents in the groups, there appear to be two kinds of information parents desire and three key ways in which to provide this to parents.

The two kinds of resources parents want are:

1. **Print resources** (which includes information available on the Internet), and
2. **Group-based workshops, presentations and/or seminars** on special topics where parents can ask questions and hear how other parents are dealing with key parenting and child development issues.

The three main ways in which parents wish to receive this information includes:

1. **Island Parent magazine.** Because this is a trusted, authoritative and universal source of information for almost all participants in the Greater Victoria region, this magazine appears to be an essential vehicle for providing parenting and child development information to participants (even though participants felt the overall layout of the publication could be improved to enhance its readability).
2. **Public Health Units and midwives.** Participants felt that Public Health Units and midwives (and even physicians) are ideally suited to provide information to new parents since these professionals see almost all parents at some point.
3. **Neighbourhood Houses and community/recreation centres.** Participants suggested that Neighbourhood Houses and community/recreation centres are ideal places for parenting workshops and programs to be held and also provide a central location for distributing information because these are places where parents and children congregate.

“Doctors, public health nurses and midwives should be supplying information or an information booklet when the baby is born.” (Victoria Participant)

“I had to ask for pamphlets, ask for information, ask for related resources...ask if programs are available or if there was a person I could speak to specifically. The information was never volunteered.” (Westshore Participant).

“...This is going to change who I am. That was scary. My biggest fear was me changing as a person. After I got over that, I was excited to meet that person.” (Salt Spring Island Participant)

“When you have older ones, you tend to know what works and what doesn’t.” (Westshore Participant).

As an aside, participants mentioned they wanted program and service providers to be more proactive in promoting their programs and services and in offering information. At times, participants reported having to “hound” people for information and would have preferred that information and support be more readily offered.

Q. Does the type and source of information change depending on whether one is a first-time parent or a seasoned parent?

A. First-time parents have a far greater need for prenatal information and information about what being pregnant is all about, what parenting means (and how to parent), and how a child is going to change their lives, them personally and their relationship with a partner or spouse.

The sources of information most heavily relied upon by first-time parents are books and magazines, midwives, public health units, programs such as Best Babies and other prenatal classes or one-on-one counseling (through Neighbourhood Houses and other community resources), other parents, friends or family members, and the Internet.

More seasoned parents are a bit more self-reliant since they know what being pregnant is all about, what to expect and how this has impacted their relationship with a partner. However, there is a need for information on issues such as integrating the new child into the family and how another child is going to change the family dynamic. In addition, there is an ongoing need for parenting skills because:

“Each child needs to be parented differently. What works for one child, does not necessarily work for another child. And just when you think you have mastered one thing, another thing comes up. What works this month might not work next month. I am always needing more skills, more information, more advice on the new things that come up all the time.” (Victoria participant)

For this reason, seasoned parents continue to access the same sources of information because their overall need for information has increased into areas such as behavioural and emotional issues (e.g. developmentally appropriate play, dealing with temper tantrums, coping with bullying, developing a healthy self esteem, encouraging independence without losing control, managing sibling rivalry, child depression, reasoning with a child). However, seasoned parents also start to seek out advice (sometimes from the private sector) on specific

issues like ways in which to enhance their child's language or social skills.

4 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Participants in the focus groups appear to be utilizing a number of resources for parenting and child development information. Prenatally, the sources being used most are Public Health Units and midwives, programs such as Best Babies and other prenatal classes, books and magazines, and other parents, friends and family members. At this stage, participants are looking for any and all information about pregnancy, childbirth and parenting.

After childbirth, Neighbourhood Houses and other parent and tot drop in programs (e.g. at churches, informal gatherings in one's home, community centres etc.) are being accessed in addition to Public Health Units, physicians, books and magazines, and programs such as Baby Talk, Best Families and Nobody's Perfect. Participants are reaching out to these resources for support in learning how to be a good parent, what to do (and not to do) when raising children, what others are doing and what one should expect in the way of developmental milestones. Parents are also looking for activities to do with their children and any other tips that will make them a better parent.

There seems to be an ongoing need for information and support programs and services, irrespective of the participant's age, socio-economic circumstances and number of children. Parents do not want to feel alone when raising their children and they are eager to be the best parents they can be.

While participants reported a plethora of existing programs for infants and toddlers, they bemoaned the paucity of programs for children over the age of 3 (other than various recreational activities through recreation and community centres, for example). The need for support does not stop at age 3, instead parents start to face new challenges such as behavioural issues or the addition of another child into the family. Parents want continued support and advice on a range of topics, outlined earlier.

What are the best ways to get information to parents? Parents want print resources on a variety of topics and they want group interaction where they can learn from experts and other parents by asking questions and listening to the questions of other parents.

Participants in this research see *Island Parent* magazine, Public Health Units and midwives, and Neighbourhood Houses and community/recreation centres as playing an instrumental role in facilitating information dissemination and being a catalyst for workshops, seminars and presentations.

As a whole, this research confirms that parents are calling upon a network of structured and casual resources to support and inform their parenting approaches and expertise.