

**Do You Hear What I Say?
Attending to the Voices of Prince Edward Island Parents**



A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Education in Leadership in Learning
University of Prince Edward Island

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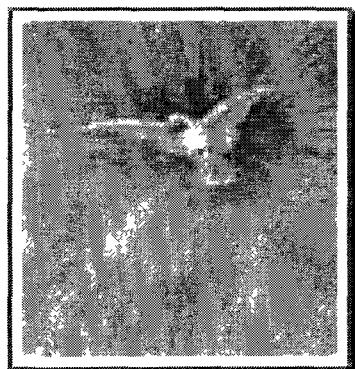
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to my parents, Jarvis and Phyllis MacWilliams. Dad went home to his final rest on Monday, October 26, 2009 and Mom on Wednesday, November 25, 2009.

It was so very difficult to see you both leave but there is also much comfort in knowing that you are together forever in perfect peace and love. I will hold the memories and legacy you have left with me, always. I have so very much to be grateful, and thankful for, as a result of being blessed to be your daughter. Thank you for instilling in me the values of family and friends, of hard work and in always believing in myself and others. Thank you for showing me the meaning of love, forgiveness and commitment. You taught me to strive to be at peace with myself and to always be the best I could be. You believed in me from the moment I came into this world and we grew to share a bond which was, and is, unbreakable. I am grateful for the gifts of your lives and you are both with me forever and always.. *till we meet again.*

Love to you both, my dear Mom and Dad !



White Dove; The Angel of Peace

"What we do for ourselves dies with us, what we do for others remains immortal."
Albert Pike

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to obtain a perspective from Prince Edward Island parents of preschool children, regarding their views on what is important for them, and for their children, in terms of understanding healthy development and parental support. Specifically the research set out to assess: (a) whether parents believed they had a meaningful voice in program or policy developments which impact children and families; (b) what concerns they might have in relation to child development, childcare, and early childhood education in general; and (c) whether they identified any gaps in current services or programs.

Do You Hear What I Say? Attending to the Voices of Prince Edward Island Families, captured the opinions and perspectives of parents of preschool children from across the province of PEI regarding their views of early childhood and parenting. Parents indicated that they wanted high quality accessible, affordable childcare, effective communication with program developers and policy makers, ongoing opportunities to provide input into decisions which affect them as parents or their children, programs and services which reflect current research and best practices, and information on child development and parenting techniques. In general PEI parents want to be understood and have their needs responded to in a meaningful way.

The findings from the research may be meaningful for program and policy developers interested in the health and well-being of families with young children.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INVESTING IN WHAT MATTERS.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Overview.....	4
Topic and Purpose.....	6
The Voice of Parents.....	7
Potential Significance.....	8
General Research Questions.....	10
	13
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	13
What Does the Research Say?.....	13
Healthy Families, Healthy Children.....	14
Influences on Child Development.....	18
The Family Structure.....	19
Childcare As a Support.....	24
Family Context.....	27
The Significance of Early Childhood Education and Care.....	31
Policy Direction.....	33
Prince Edward Island's Children.....	34
Healthy Child Development Strategy.....	37
The Early Years Report.....	42
Securing the Future for Our Children: Preschool Excellence Initiative.....	44
Summary.....	46
Identifying a Gap in the Research.....	46
CHAPTER THREE:METHODOLOGY.....	48
Introduction: Capturing Their Voices.....	48
Development of the Survey.....	49
Survey Format.....	50
Selection of Participants.....	53
My Role as Researcher.....	54
Data Collection Procedures.....	55
Data Management Strategies.....	56
Data Analysis Strategies.....	57
Trustworthiness Features.....	58
Credibility.....	59
Transferability.....	60
Dependability.....	61
Confirmability.....	61
Delimitation of the Survey.....	62
Conclusion.....	63

CHAPTER FOUR: PARENT SURVEY FINDINGS.....	64
Statistical Significance.....	65
Demographic Information.....	65
Participant Overview.....	65
Overview of Participants' Children.....	69
Analysis of Research Questions.....	72
Research Question 1.....	73
Research Question 2.....	74
Research Question 3.....	78
Quality of Programs and Services Offered.....	79
Accessible Programs and Services / Affordable Childcare.....	82
Research Question 4.....	87
Research Question 5.....	92
Summary.....	94
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY.....	96
Discussion.....	96
What We Know.....	96
What the Study Revealed.....	100
Parent Perspectives.....	102
Implication of the Study.....	103
Implication for Policy.....	103
Implication for Programs and Services.....	106
Impact for Parents and Children.....	107
Future Research.....	108
Final Thoughts.....	109
References...	111
Appendices.....	118

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Survey Ranking for Research Question One.....	73
Table 2. Survey Ranking for Research Question Three.....	79

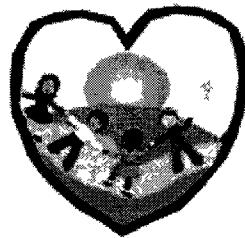
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Circle of Influence (Berk & Shanker, 2006, p 28).....	15
Figure 2 . Our Child, UPEI Research in Early Childhood Development.....	16
Figure 3. Keyes Framework (<i>International Journal of Early Years Education</i> , 2002).....	24
Figure 4. PEI Strategic Model (For our Children, 2000, p. 10)	36
Figure 5. An Early Childhood Framework for PEI.....	39
Figure 6. Proposed Vision for Children (Flanagan, 2010, p. 15).....	40
Figure 7. Model for PEI ECEC System.....	41
Figure 8. Scientific & Naturalistic Terms Appropriate to the Four Aspects of Trustworthiness.....	59
Figure 9. Age of Participants	66
Figure 10. Employment Status	67
Figure 11. Total Household Income.....	68
Figure 12: Participants Education Level.....	68
Figure 13. Marital Status.....	68
Figure 14. Developmental or Health Concerns	70
Figure 15. Services or Supports Required.....	71
Figure 16. Parenting Support	88
Figure 17. Childcare Arrangements.....	89
Figure 18. Effective Childcare Space.....	90
Figure 19. Workshop Topics	91
Figure 20. Choosing a Community.....	91
Figure 21. Services Missing from Community	92
Figure 22. Uses Childcare	93
Figure 23. What Makes You Feel Welcome at Center	93

CHAPTER ONE: INVESTING IN WHAT MATTERS

Introduction

We believe the needs of Island children should be our first priority. We believe that children grow up best within homes that are able to provide security, nurturance, respect and love. We believe that protecting the interests of children is a basic social responsibility. We believe that communities have a significant role in the development of our children. We understand the value of working together. We believe in reflecting the diversity of parents in Prince Edward Island (*For our Children, 2000*).



Do we, as a society, value children? I expect when you first read this question the initial reaction of many might be, "Well yes, of course, I do!" As individuals, many of us place a high value on children and their place in our society. Values though are elusive and I suggest somewhat difficult to agree upon. From my perspective, values are deeply rooted in the culture from which the family comes and in the society in which the family lives. This study did not look at values from a wider Canadian perspective, but rather attempted to identify some of the values or priorities held by Prince Edward Island parents of preschool children, and whether they see these as being supported through public policy or program delivery. Understanding parental values is important, and yet, I suggest, that because of the complexities of what matters (or is of value) to

parents, values can be the very thing that makes the success of a program or service development and delivery that much more difficult to achieve.

The beliefs quoted above from the *For our Children Report (2000)* are difficult to argue against. Now, if I were to ask you to consider these same belief statements, and then ask, do our federal and provincial policies and programs reflect a high value placed on children and their parents, would your answer be the same as when you were asked if society values children? My experiences and current research (McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007) would suggest that the answers would be different than when I asked you to consider these statements from a personal perspective. While the documents reflect a value for children, does this lead to programs and services parents really want or need? I would suggest there may be a gap between what parents require to support them as a young family and the programs and services they desire for their children, with what is often put in place by some community and government programs and services.

So what matters to parents of young children? If such a question were to be posed to parents and guardians (parents), it is likely that each individual parent would define what is important to them, using unique criteria. Some parents could place a higher value on outdoor activity, while others might focus on nutrition, early education, family involvement, a sense of community, or friends and so on. For example, some parents might enjoy an afternoon together with their children at the local park while others may prefer an indoor activity such as reading together at a library. Some parents may have children with special needs, unique parenting situations or challenging economic and social needs. It is also likely that there would not just be one area of need or concern; there would most likely be overlap among parents' priorities, as well as

differences. I wonder if the priorities parents hold for their children and their roles in society are in sync with the programs and services parents feel they can access. What are parents' priorities when it comes to the needs and interests of their children? How well do parents feel society is responding to and supporting these priorities? How informed are parents about healthy child development and how does that level of understanding impact the priorities they set? I believe we need to learn more from parents. What are their needs and desires, and in turn, what is our role in supporting them? This research attempted to provide an opportunity to hear parents' perspectives on family support, knowledge of early childhood development, and childcare.

I also reviewed the financial expenditures of both the federal and provincial governments on family programs and services through a very broad lens. For the purposes of this research I did not examine, or make any attempt to evaluate, any one program, service or funding source. This study explored Prince Edward Island parents perspectives on the community where they live, views of early childhood education, the services and supports which currently exist, or may be missing for them as they raise their children. In the end, the intent was to provide some insights into the perspectives on the phenomena of parenting held by Prince Edward Island parents' of preschool children and, in turn, offer some points of reflection and consideration for those who develop policies, programs and services in support of the healthy development of children and parents.

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are used consistently:

- ➔ Parent refers to either the biological parent(s) or legal guardian(s) of the child;
- ➔ Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) or Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC) refers to the sector of early childhood for children up to age 5, including

the regulated or licensed education and care of the child and the unregulated or unlicensed care provided for children;

- ◆ Caregiver refers to the individual, other than the parent(s), who is responsible for a child's care and well-being; and
- ◆ Early Childhood Educator refers to the trained and certified early childhood personnel.

Overview

As a society, Canadians often claim a high priority for our children and their parents. As evidenced in the following initiatives, we maintain with great pride federal and provincial family-friendly policies and early childhood initiatives, such as the Early Childhood Development Agreement (2000), the Early Learning and Childcare Framework Agreement (2003), the Early Learning and Childcare Initiative (2005) and Childcare Spaces (2007). In spite of these and many other efforts, the financial investment made for children in Canada is the lowest among fourteen countries surveyed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Education and Care (OECD, 2006), with approximately 0.25% of the Canadian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) spent on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for children from pre-natal to age six years. In *Starting Strong II* (2006), the OECD suggests a minimum of 1% of the GDP is required to adequately provide a quality service for children and parents. Based on this gap, researchers suggest that, as a Canadian society, we must critically examine the financial investments made for children and parents and consider if we truly value our children and the importance of the early years in human development. Are our actions reflective of the values we state in our policies?

From a Prince Edward Island point of view, some would argue substantial investments have been made in our children and their parents. In 2005-2006, the provincial allocation for regulated childcare was \$4,725,000 with a further \$3,200,000 for the provincial kindergarten program (ECEC in Canada, 2007). The Child and Family Services Division with the Department of Social Services and Seniors spent approximately \$20,037,000, including the amount indicated for regulated childcare, in programs and services for our children(up to adulthood) and parents (Annual Report, 2005-2006). In 2007-2008, the provincial allocation for regulated childcare increased from the previous annual report. Spending increased to \$6,226,767 with a further \$3,200,000 for the provincial kindergarten program (ECEC in Canada, 2008). While these investments appear significant, important questions must be asked about how effective these investments have been for children and parents. Are these investments reflective of the desires and needs of Prince Edward Island parents and do they reach the majority of children and parents, or are they targeted, supporting a specific sub-group of children and families?

I wonder that if parents truly understood the importance of the very early years, and the impact the early years has on later development (Mustard, 2010; Shonkoff, 2009), would they demand programs and services which not only supported this critical time of life, but cultivated, upheld and sustained it? The same question could also be asked about the government or community programs and services provided. How well do these reflect what we know about early childhood development and issues of parenting in the 21st Century? Do the policies, programs and services provided for children and their parents accommodate and confirm the critical impact of the very early years on overall healthy development? Some advocates (Friendly, 2004) would argue

that policies and programs do not always consider factors such as the importance of the early years on overall success and changing family dynamics. On the other hand, if they did, would our children have better outcomes and greater success as they grow and develop? As a result, would Prince Edward Island and in turn Canada, have a very different family and early childhood investment package? According to the National Academy of Sciences (1997) programs and policies for 21st century families must focus on the broad health and well-being of children and their families. They suggest strides must be made to: further reduce the number of children and families living in poverty; reduce the incidence of unwanted pregnancies; and develop a deeper understanding and prevention of child abuse and neglect. It is critical to understand that sustained investments in quality early childhood programs is key.

Recently the province of Prince Edward Island introduced the PEI Preschool Excellence Initiative (2010) which is aimed at moving the direction of early childhood education and care significantly forward in the coming months and years. The highlight of this initiative is the strategic move from a focus on childcare to a focus on early learning and care. Further discussion on this initiative will be shared in Chapter 2 of this study.

Topic and Purpose

The aim of this study was twofold: 1) to obtain a perspective from PEI parents of preschool children regarding their views on what is important for them, and for their children, as it relates to understanding healthy development and the need for parental support, and 2) to use the information gathered to inform current policy and program development.

Key themes for grounding my work which surfaced as a result of my examination of the research include: the importance of relationships between parents and their caregivers or educators (Keys, 2002; Sumsion, 1999; Zellman & Perlman, 2006); the role of public and social policy (Flanagan, 2010; Friendly, 2004; OECD, 2006); understanding the dynamics of modern family and community life (Drummond, 2005; Sauve 2009); and the role individuals play in the development of healthy children and parents (Brendtro, 2006; Ginsberg, 2007). I believe these themes are critical if we are to understand and respond to the needs and expectations of today's children and parents. I will explore these themes in detail in chapter two of this thesis.

Parents and children need support that is responsive to both individual and family needs. Parents will at times rely on others to care for their child(ren) (Zellman & Perlman, 2006). The relationship between the parent and the caregiver is instrumental in the success of any childcare arrangement (Sumsion, 1999). Understanding the contexts in which parents live from day to day is also important in order to understand the parenting needs of parents, and how best to support their child(ren)'s development. Parents and thus, family dynamics, are changing and many of the needs of today's parents differ from those of parents a generation ago (Knoph & Swick, 2008). Whether it be the reality of both parents in the workforce or lone parent run households, understanding these needs will assist in the development of solid programs and services which are responsive to and supportive of children and their parents.

The Voice of Parents

Parent input has been gathered by some academic research (Keyes, 2002; Mason, 2003; Barrette, 2009), government studies (Mella, 2009; Flanagan, 2010) and by

non-government organizations (Oldershaw, 2002; CCL, 2008). The specific context of my study focused on perspectives of PEI parents not gathered in other research to date.

Much of the current research is broad in context and focuses on societal and family trends (Daly, 2004; Friendly, 2004; Knopf & Swick, 2008). Specific research in the area of family desires and needs, where the voice of parents is documented, is required if decision makers are to ensure the voices of Prince Edward Island parents is reflected in the policies, programs and services designed. Although much is known about the importance of the early years to overall development (McCain, et al., 2007), there is little known about what parents of young children view as important for the healthy development of their child(ren) or what they truly understand about the early developmental needs of their children.

To explore this further, I surveyed PEI parents of preschoolers to discover what needs they identified for family support, their knowledge of early childhood development, why they chose the community in which they lived and their childcare arrangements.

Potential Significance

This study is relevant to both the recent interest in early childhood education and care (ECEC) throughout Canada (in particular PEI) and in the need to establish investments that must be made in order for children to have optimal opportunity for healthy development (Flanagan, 2010). Early childhood experiences and the impact of the early years have become generally accepted as having a direct link to a child's overall development and well-being (McCain et al., 2007).

As a province, PEI has made significant changes to public policy which government believes are in the best interests of our children and parents. In April 2008,

a newly formed Department of Education and Early Childhood Development was announced. This brought the responsibility for early childhood education together with public education under one department. In addition to having responsibility for curriculum development, programs and services for kindergarten to grade twelve, the new Department has responsibility for early childhood development and as a result must be responsive to the needs of children in the early years and their parents.

As well, Government announced (April, 2008) that the provincial kindergarten program would be moved from a community-based program to a school-based program. After a year of research and consultations the Kindergarten Commissioner, appointed by government, released her long-anticipated report, *Every Child a Better Future* (Mella, 2009). The report made recommendations on how the government of Prince Edward Island could best proceed to transition kindergarten from the existing community-based model to a school-based model. The report also made specific recommendations regarding the kindergarten delivery model, curriculum, staffing, space, transportation and linkages with the early childhood sector (Mella, 2009).

As a result of these recommendations, and to better understand the impact of the transition, Government announced an immediate and comprehensive review of the early childhood sector. In June 2010, Government released, *The Early Years Report; Early Learning in PEI: An Investment in the Island's Future* (Flanagan, 2010). The findings of this report will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this study.

Both of these reports (Flanagan, 2010; Mella, 2009) received input from Prince Edward Island parents, caregivers, community members and educators. It has been my experience that when asked, parents provide invaluable information and insight that must be used and understood when programs and policies are considered. In both

instances the perspective of PEI parents was captured and as a result influenced the direction of both the kindergarten program and early learning system.

As a result of the transition of kindergarten and the release of both the Early Years Report (Flanagan, 2010) and the PEI Preschool Excellence Initiative (2010), it has been confirmed that the early childhood sector in PEI will look very different in the months and years ahead. Significant revision of the current early childhood sector will be needed in order to respond to the needs of children and parents across PEI as the province shifts its focus from childcare to early learning and care.

To best prepare for the future, understanding what is important to our Prince Edward Island parents is pivotal to any planning. It is the intent of this study to bring forward an additional perspective, not yet sought from PEI parents, which will add to the knowledge base and assist both community and government in program and policy development at all levels.

General Research Questions

I believe that all parents want what is best for their child. I also believe how this is achieved differs from family to family. Parents have a story to tell. This study gave parents a chance to share their concerns and ideas about parenting support, child development, childcare options and early childhood education. It also gave them opportunity to highlight the strengths they currently see in any of the above and offer overall suggestions in any area they wanted to reference.

To explore the perspective of PEI parents, I invited 600 parents from across the province to take part in a survey. Individual parents could participate only once in the data collection. Participants were residents of PEI and every effort was made to have parents of infants, toddlers and preschoolers participate. I sought support in accessing

parents from early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs, public health nursing, family resource centers and through personal contacts.

In addition to my extensive experience as an early childhood educator, teacher and leader in the field of early learning and childcare, the general questions to be addressed in the study were posed as a result of my review of the current research and literature in the area of early child development (McCain, et al.,2009; Mustard, 2010), early childhood policies and practices (Flanagan, 2010; Shonkoff, 2009) and social and family sciences (Mason, 2003; Sauve, 2009; Willms, 2002). The following five questions were then explored:

- 1) How do parents understand the importance of the early years and use this knowledge in their child's early childhood experiences?
- 2) How do parents believe they can have a more meaningful and influential role in decisions affecting their children's well being?
- 3) What are the principal concerns of parents as their children grow from infancy to school entry?
- 4) What types of support systems exist to assist parents in responding to these concerns?
- 5) What gaps do parents identify in the current programs/services provided?

I also looked at each question to consider if there were any differences according to age, gender, educational level, marital status or income. By listening to the parents' "voices" and through analyzing what they shared, I have attempted to capture their perspectives and present a representative voice of Prince Edward Island parents of preschool children. It is my desire to offer a better understanding of what PEI parents view as important for their children in relation to their child's development, to identify

the family and community supports that are required, and to identify what types of educational experiences parents may expect for their children.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

What Does the Research Say?

This study focuses on the areas of adult - child relationships, public and social policy, early childhood education, modern family life, and the healthy development of children and families. I selected studies from academic research (Keyes, 2002; Brentro, 2006; Murray et.al, 2007), government reports (For our Children, 2000; Friendly et.al, 2006; Flanagan, 2010) and non-government organizations (CCL, 2008; OECD, 2009) . The review of the literature provided information regarding child development and the practices and policies in early childhood, while outlining the role of parents, families, professionals, programs, services, communities and governments. Other than the information found in surveys or polls completed by Government, there is a gap in the research, particularly in PEI, in terms of identifying the perspective or voice of the parent and how that voice is reflected in program and policy development and current initiatives.

Healthy Families; Healthy Children

Children do not arrive into the world in isolation from their family, the dynamics impacting their family, or the community and society in which they were born. Additionally, no child arrives into the loving and supportive arms of his or her parents with a “how-to manual”. Many parents and children will grow and learn together forming a life-long relationship. Together, they create a family which is unique to themselves and their set of beliefs, values, and influences. This set of beliefs, values, and influences could also be referred to as the culture into which the child is born and will be raised. For parents then, the everyday decisions of parenting are shaped by non-

specific, background undercurrents that guide what seems right, natural, or appropriate (Daly, 2004).

Influences on Child Development

In thinking specifically about how children grow and develop, it seems evident that they are directly impacted by their parents, their family, friends, childcare providers, the neighborhood in which they live, the experiences they have and the culture and society to which they were born. In considering these influences on human development, Dr. Uriel Bronfenbrenner linked the disciplines of psychology, sociology, education and anthropology together to create a theory of human development known as the *ecology of human development*. This ecological systems view of development sees the child developing within a complex system of relationships that are affected by various levels of the environment (Berk, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's most basic belief or principle is that every child must have at least one adult who is "unconditionally crazy" about him/her. Implied by this statement is the need for this same adult to have the support of another adult (as cited in Brendtro, 2006 p.163).

Healthy development depends on the experiences that a child has in his/her family, at preschool, with his/her peer group, and within his/her community (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This, in turn, is impacted by the broader community, extended family, and the laws and society in which the child lives. Known as the *circle of influence* (see Figure 1) a child will behave and interact based on the experiences he/she has in each of these areas. Within the context of Bronfenbrenner's theory there are five systems which impact the child's overall development: (a) the microsystem which is the layer closest to the child, such as family and childcare; (b) the mesosystem which is the layer that provides connection between the structures such as home, neighborhood or childcare

center to the microsystem; (c) the exosystem which refers to the larger social settings that do not contain the child but affects his/her experiences, such as parent's workplace, community services and neighborhoods; (d) the macrosystem which refers to the cultural values, customs, resources and laws of the societies; and (e) the chronosystem which refers to the changes that will occur over time, thus impacting any of the inner circles of influence, such as the death of a parent or the age of the child (Berk & Shanker, 2006). It would be ideal if the inner circles of influence (microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem) would work together in the best interest of the child, that is, placing the child at the center. However, events and socio-cultural-economic structures in the life of the child and his/her family impact the overall success and healthy development of the child.

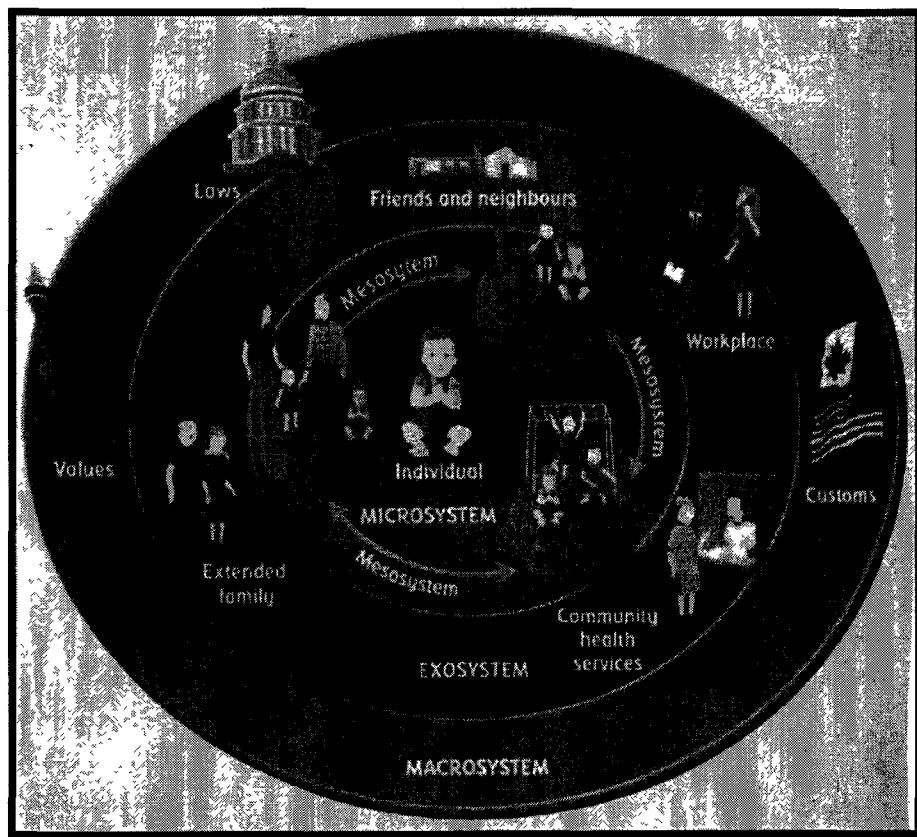


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Circle of Influence (Berk & Shanker, 2006, p 28)

Recent research in early childhood development (Gabriel, Doiron, Sanchez & Wartman, 2010), expanding on the earlier work of Bronfenbrenner, would suggest a more interactive framework when considering child development. Although built upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, this framework (see Figure 2) proposes that each of the systems impacts all others, and that the child is always actively involved or impacted. Specifically, the child has an impact on each facet of his/her life, or "nest" as suggested by Gabriel et al. (2010). Growth and development then is not done "to" the child but rather, growth is interplay of life circumstances, family involvement and community supports. Simply stated, the child is an active participant in all corners of life: the child and family; the child and community; the child and society; and the global child. Each of the nested components of the model impacts the other (Gabriel et al., 2010).

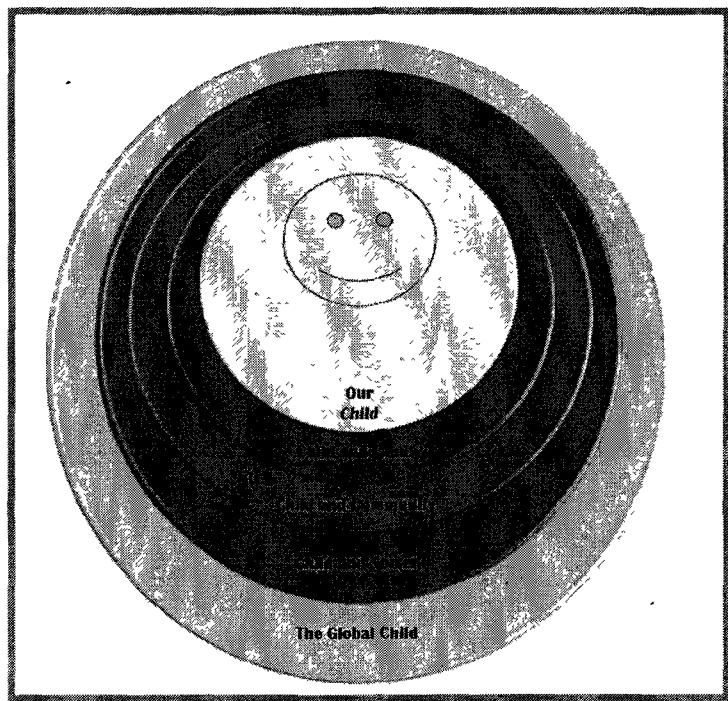


Figure 2. Our Child, UPEI Research in Early Childhood Development.

Psychological, biological, and environmental factors are all at work as the child grows and develops. The experiences a child has will have an impact on how he/she develops and views the world in which he/she lives. Therefore, all factors of a child's life must be considered. When there is balance, children will live in harmony with self and others. Children must have supportive, caring, loving environments where at least one supported person cares unconditionally about them (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

According to Dr. Doug Willms as reported in the *Understanding the Early Years Report* (2001), family characteristics and the community environments in which children grow up may affect their future education, income, occupation, marriage, health, friends, and even life expectancy. When considering the child in this context I believe it becomes absolutely necessary to understand the needs and desires of parents in order to provide for the necessary supports to assist them with successfully raising healthy children.

The Family Structure

Families in industrialized nations are increasingly more diverse (Sauve, 2009). For example, there are fewer births per family, more adoptions, more lesbian and gay parents who are open about their sexual orientation, more parents who have never been married, re-married parents, and mothers in the workforce (Berk & Shanker, 2006). Regardless of the family structure, the family unit remains a social system with many interacting influences on the child (Berk & Shanker, 2006). These varieties in family structures suggest that the needs and supports of families are also varied. As I considered the impact parenting has on child development, I also wondered what issues parents face and in turn what supports might be needed to assist them to be successful at raising healthy children.

One of the issues facing families today is the pressure of trying to balance family life with work life. Working parents are now a dominant factor in Canadian society, thus, there is an increase in the need to balance family life with work life (Sauve, 2009). The causes of family and/or work imbalances are many: economic pressures, and social and demographic changes, which have an impact on our society as a whole (Barrette, 2009). The world is changing. Consider, for example, the realities related to the global market, large numbers of women in the workforce, and ever changing technologies, which Barrette (2009) suggests drives the individual's need to "keep up". As a result, parents often feel the pressure to work longer hours each week day and weekends, both at work and at home. This suggests that, overall, families spend less time together, need more education than ever before, and are more likely to be lead by a lone-parent (Knoph & Swick, 2008).

The average time Canadians spend with family on a typical workday has decreased by about three quarters of an hour, from 250 minutes per day in 1986 to 206 minutes in 2005, a drop of 18% (Sauve, 2009). People who live in family households make up 84% of the total supply of Canadian labour. The last ten years has seen rising labour participation by all members of the household with the largest increase being female lone-parent families and wives with young children (Sauve, 2009). Managing schedules is a complex activity for many families and, because of these time-demands, parents find themselves looking for balance and support in parenting (Daly, 2004). Families have stated that they need more support in the form of childcare (Knoph & Swick, 2008).

Childcare as a Support

Childcare refers to care provided by someone other than the parent. Choosing childcare arrangements is informed by the information parents gather, parental values, their knowledge of child development, their knowledge of quality childcare and their experiences thus far with childcare. Other factors such as the child's age, mother's educational level, employment, family ethnicity, and childcare policies also impact parents' decisions (Gable & Kelly, 2000). Given the changes in society and the demands and stressors on families, parents often struggle with the home/work balance and may feel guilty about not being able to keep their lives in balance. Early childhood professionals need to be cognizant of these realities and be prepared to respond in a highly supportive manner (Gable & Kelly, 2000).

The Canadian Council for Learning conducted a survey in 2008 of the attitudes, experiences and beliefs of parents of children from 0- to 12 years old toward childcare and early learning. It was found that two-thirds of Canadian parents report using some form of childcare on a regular basis. Parents with higher incomes were more likely to use early childhood centres. Parents who did not use early childhood services provided some form of learning opportunities for their children through more frequent use of organized play groups and public facilities such as libraries, museums and parks. The survey also found that Canadian parents seemed to recognize the underlying importance of play to young children's healthy physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Nearly all parents reported encouraging or allowing their 2- to 5-year-olds to engage in unstructured play for periods of at least 30 minutes.

In another research study conducted on Prince Edward Island (Take 30 Benchmark Research, 2008), approximately 60% of participants (parents/ guardians of

children 0-8) reported childcare as either "difficult" or "very difficult" to access. The findings demonstrated differences among the three counties in Prince Edward Island-Queens, Prince, and Kings. The Benchmark study showed that participants in Queens county had a higher degree of difficulty (62%) than parents from Prince county (54%) and Kings county (53%) in locating childcare. In addition, the PEI Early Childhood Parent Survey Report (Flanagan, 2010) also found that accessible, affordable childcare is an issue for parents.

For those parents who require childcare at one time or another, the success of this arrangement hinges in part on the relationship between parent and educator /caregiver. For some early childhood educators the parent- teacher relationship is one that educators are often unprepared for (Sumsion, 1999). The parent- teacher relationship is complex and arguably depends on the expectations of the early childhood program and maturity of both the parent and the teacher (Sumsion, 1999). Zellman and Perlman (2006) support the notion that educators require daily contact with families. The research is consistent: the quality of the relationships is key.

Dr. Carol R. Keyes, Professor of Early Childhood Education, has devoted much of her research to examining teachers as researchers and the parent-teacher relationship. Dr. Keyes has developed a theoretical framework for teachers and parents based on the mutual understanding and respect of the relationship between parent and teacher (Keyes, 2002).

The importance of a healthy relationship between the home and early childhood environment is widely accepted (Keyes, 2002) and in the case of regulated or formal childcare, this relationship can occur mostly by assignment and not necessarily by choice. According to Keyes (2002), the common interest between parents and educators

remains the well-being and development of the child, while the success of this relationship is linked to the mutual trust and two-way communication of the parent and educator. Other factors that have an impact on the success of the relationship are: the degree of match between the culture and values of the parents and educators; the societal forces at work on the family and the childcare center; and how the parents and educators view their roles (Sumsion, 1999).

In considering culture and values, Keyes (2002) suggests we must branch beyond the perspective of previous generations that these (culture and values) are closely matched. Educators / caregivers and families do not necessarily share the same community or have the sense of belonging, as they once had. Families and educators /caregivers often come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Because of these differences in how each relates and communicates, working together can potentially be more difficult and may take dedication to foster relationships (Keyes, 2002). Understanding one another in the context of our culture helps to frame our understanding of the society in which we live (Hall, 1997).

Society too, has changed over time (Berk & Shanker, 2006). Consider the impact that the changing family structure, the changing nature of work, technology, a more diverse population and a more service-oriented society has on raising children (Berk & Shanker, 2006). These dynamics will also have an impact on the relationship between educator and parent (Keyes, 2002). Each person experiences the realities of everyday life and stress, which then becomes their lived realities (Hall, 1997). This would imply that developing a healthy, professional relationship will be dependent on both parent and educator learning to understand and respect the other (Sumsion, 1999; Keyes, 2002).

Keyes (2002) suggests that the role of educators has changed over time. The educator's role is specific and relates to the education and care of the child, while the parent continues to have the overall responsibility for all domains of the child's life. When the roles are unclear or muddied, difficulties may occur. For example, parents who expect educators to provide dinner and a bath when arriving late to pick their child up may be crossing the boundary of their relationship. As well, educators who tell parents what to do with relation to their child's immunization, for example, may also be crossing the relationship boundary. Keyes (2002) contends that while the role of the educator is to support the parents and provide advice if asked, it is not his/her role to assume they know what is best for the child. Nor is it appropriate for the parents to expect others will assume their parenting responsibilities. There is a clear and distinct difference in the role of parent and educator and it is important to keep this in focus (Keyes, 2002).

One interesting aspect that Keyes (2002) raises about the parent- educator relationship is the belief that the parent-educator relationship experienced in early childhood shifts when the child enters school. In the past it was understood that in early childhood, there was a parent-focused approach, that is, all that is done is in response to the needs of the parents, while in school there was a more school-focused approach with an emphasis on the needs of the curriculum and teachers ahead of the child and family (Keyes, 2002). However, in recent times, a more partnership-focused approach, one with mutual interest and goals, is prevalent in both early childhood and school settings (Keyes, 2002).

Keyes (2002) and Sumsion (1999) both emphasized that the efficacy beliefs, expectations, and personal attributes of both educators and parents will have a direct

impact on the success of their relationships with one another. The success of the relationship has a direct impact on the healthy development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Understanding these dynamics and recognizing their impact will assist in developing a more effective parent-educator relationship. Communication remains a key component. The quality of the communication will define the quality of the relationship (Keyes, 2002). Keyes (2002) has created a theoretical framework (see Figure 3) that suggests educators must consider their relationships with parents from a multi-layered perspective.

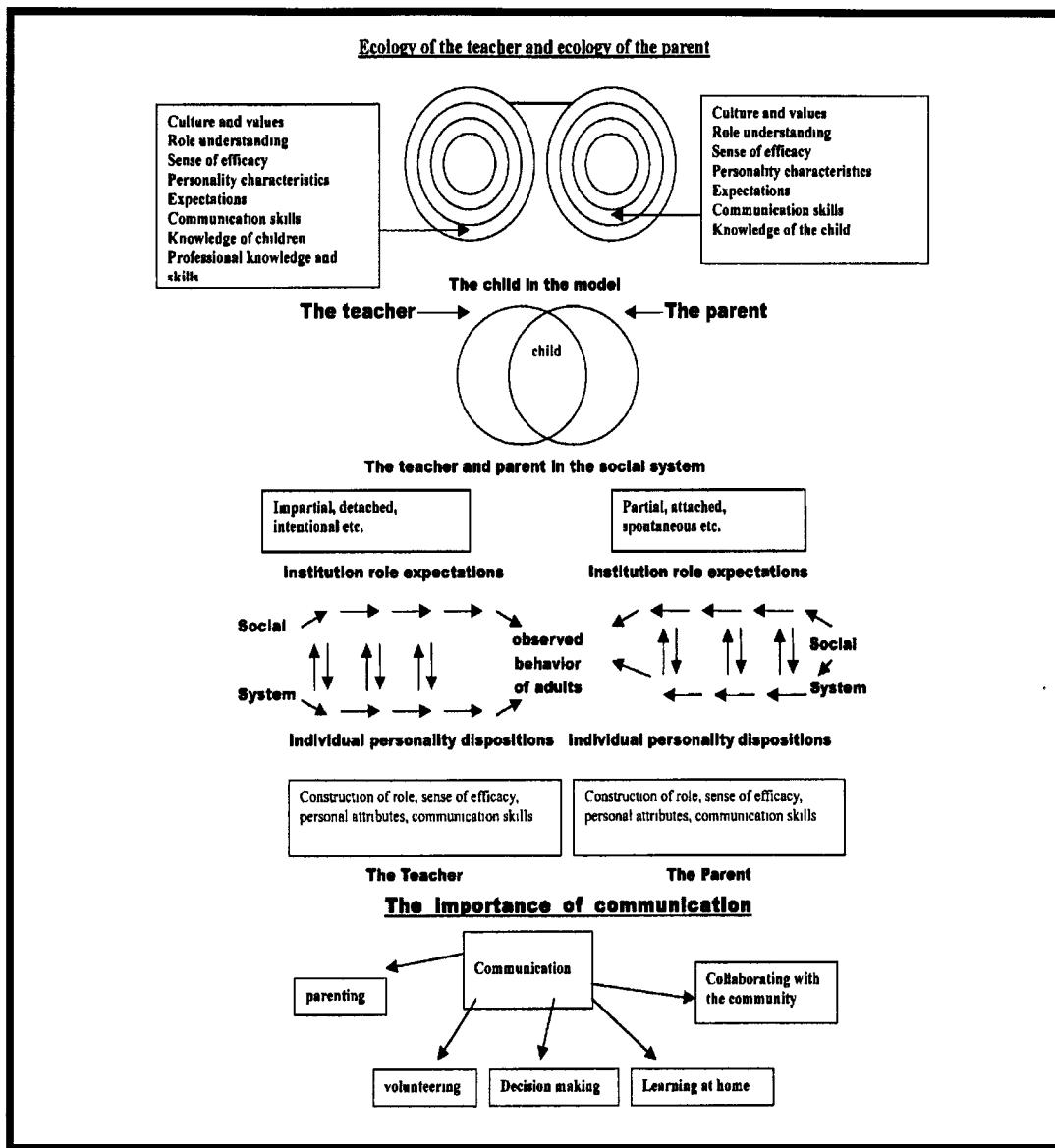


Figure 3. Keyes' framework for helping educators understand parent-educator relationships.

Communication is pivotal; however, the social constructs that shape who we are, are necessary to understand, and the need for reflection is vital. Each person brings his or her own set of values and experiences to the relationship. How these intertwine will have an impact on the overall relationship between the adults and ultimately on the interactions with the child. Keyes' framework considers both the complexity and

dynamics of the relationships and highlights the importance of understanding the perspective, lived experiences, culture and values of the educators and parents as necessary for a healthy relationship. Supported by the work of Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Gabriel et al. (2010), each factor influences the other.

Family Context

Understanding the contexts in which families live strengthens the parent-educator relationship (Knoph & Swick, 2008). Families are affected by surrounding social contexts, in other words the social expectations of a community or culture (Berk & Shanker 2006). What happens in the lives of any member of the family unit will have an impact throughout the family system. The parent - child relationship can therefore be impacted by experiences of the parents in any facet of their lives. As the dynamics within any of the systems, as identified by Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Gabriel et al. (2010), change, so too may the support needs of the family (Berk & Shanker, 2006). For example, a neighbor or friend who listens to a parent's concerns enhances the parent's self-esteem; as a result the parent is more likely to interact in a positive manner with his or her child (Berk & Shanker 2006).

Berk and Shanker (2009) suggest too that parenting styles and the choices parents make will have a direct impact on the healthy development of their child. Parenting or child-rearing styles are often referred to as either a) authoritarian: parents tend to be low in acceptance and involvement, high in coercive control and low in autonomy granting; b) authoritative: parents tend to be high in acceptance and involvement, adaptive control techniques and are appropriate with autonomy granting; or c) permissive: parents tend to be warm and accepting and can be either overindulgent or inattentive, exert little control, and allow inappropriate decision making by the child

(Berk & Shanker, 2009). It is argued that the approach or style of parenting taken will have different results in terms of how children will respond to the world (Shah, 2009). For example, children who have been raised by authoritarian (strict) parenting may find it difficult to think for themselves because they are accustomed to doing things without question while children raised with a permissive (indulgent) parenting style may be more immature and may act impulsively. On the other hand children raised with a more authoritative (democratic) parenting style appear to be overall better adjusted (Shah, 2009).

Psychologist Ronald Huxley (2009) discusses parenting styles from a love and limits perspective. The "love and limits" view of parenting styles refers to the parents' discipline orientation. Parents who are oriented toward a "relational discipline" are thought to use love as their main style of parenting. Parents who use "action discipline" are thought to use limits as their main style of parenting (Huxley, 2009). He suggests that a rejecting/neglecting approach results in low love and low limits, while an authoritarian style results in low love and high limits, a more permissive style results in high love and low limits, and the more democratic or balanced style results in high love and high limits (Huxley, 2009). However, a parenting style or parenting choice has a direct correlation to a family's socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and structure (Berk & Shanker, 2009). Gabriel et.al. (2010) would suggest that parenting styles, or the choices parents make, are directly impacted by the environment or circumstances in which the family lives.

Learning about families who utilize childcare services will help early childhood education and care programs deliver a high quality service that responds to the needs of the families. With that said, it is critical that the decisions made by parents in the best

interest of their children, be supported by the educator (Murray, et al, 2007). However, supporting these decisions can at times be difficult for some educators. Specific to the parents of children with special needs, parents' choices include, but are not limited to, the medical, educational, social, recreational and therapeutic needs of their child. A renewed focus is needed on the choices families make for their children, the challenges involved in making an informed decision, and the role of the professional in the decision making process (Murray et al., 2007).

Honoring the decisions made by parents can be complex for early childhood educators or caregivers. Respecting and celebrating differences and honoring decisions made, while difficult at times, is important. Understanding one another's role, and capacity or responsibility, will in the end provide for a more effective relationship between the adults and the program or service provided for the child (Murray et al., 2007). At the same time, early childhood professionals are responsible for responding to the needs and interests of all families (NAEYC, 2005). On reflection, this suggests there may be times when educators cannot make decisions for one, over the better or good of all. Parents too have a responsibility for their choices and the ultimate impact of their choices on their child(ren).

The Significance of Early Childhood Education and Care

How do we define early childhood education and care (ECEC)? What was referred to as daycare in the 1970's, childcare in both the 1980's and 1990's is now referred to as early childhood education and care (ECEC), or early learning and childcare (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). Many parents and professionals would consider ECEC a program or service for children under school age where parents can leave their children while they work or attend school. Friendly and Prentice (2009) suggest the term

is broader, referring to the integrated and inclusive services for children and their parents, beginning at conception and up to school entry. The blending of education and care denotes the acceptance that education and care cannot be separated (Friendly & Prentice, 2009).

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been a growing priority in many countries (OECD, 2009). It is the view of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that this focus is due, at least in part, by the demands and expectations of parents. As well, ECEC is being seen as a significant component or phase of education and services which has an important contribution to make to social, economic and educational goals of the whole society (OECD, 2009). French and English-speaking countries tend to view ECEC as preparation and thus children are "getting ready for school", while the Nordic and Central European countries tend to see programs for 3 - 5 year olds (kindergarten) more as a place to support families and the overall developmental needs of children (OECD, 2009).

For over 30 years Canadian advocates have sought a commitment for a high quality, public provision for early childhood education and care, arguing it is essential for women's full participation in the labour market (Milton, 2006). Yet, with the exception of Quebec, availability of provincially-regulated childcare spaces is far below demand (Milton, 2006). Among the provinces and territories of Canada, Prince Edward Island does have the highest percentage (approx 85%) of Canadian women of child-bearing years participating in the workforce with childcare spaces available for approximately 41% of the preschool children (ECEC in Canada, 2008).

Vandell and Wolfe (2000) suggest that the quality of the early learning and childcare experience has a direct impact on children, particularly for children who are at

a disadvantage of not meeting developmental milestones or optimal growth. “Learning starts in infancy, long before formal education begins, and continues throughout life. Early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success, just as early failure breeds later failure” (Heckman, 2004, p.1). What happens in the early years, positive or negative, at home or in the care of others, impacts a child throughout his or her life (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007).

The quality of the programs offered to children can be measured using a tool called the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition* (ECERS-R). Created by Thelma Harms, Richard M. Clifford, and Debby Cryer, the tool is divided into seven categories: Space and Furnishings; Personal Care Routines; Language-Reasoning; Activities; Interactions; Program Structure; and Parents and Staff. Within the 43 items organised in these categories, play is highlighted in three: Space and Furnishings, Activities and Program Structure. Play is seen as critical to the optimal development of children. Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education places play at the very heart of the learning process (Shipley, 2008). While at play children learn to make sense of their world, they develop intellectually, socially, emotionally and physically (Shipley, 2008). Play is such a significant component in the development of children that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has declared play as a right for every child. Play is essential to development because it nurtures and supports all areas of a child’s development. Play allows children to engage, interact with and make sense of the world around them. As well, play allows parents and children to fully engage and be involved together (Ginsburg, 2007).

Ginsburg (2007) also raises the issues that family life is complex, and the time that families spend together is shrinking. As a result of the current trends in family life,

several factors have led to the sense that we are seeing a decrease in play activities. More families are led by a lone parent or both parents are working; parents feel the pressures to have their children involved in activities which build their skill or aptitude in an area; there is a trend to focus on the academic side of the child; children are exposed to more passive activities such as television or some computer/ video games and many communities are not considered safe for children to play outdoors unsupervised (Ginsburg, 2007). From my perspective quality early learning experiences for the young child and his or her family become even more critical in supporting the healthy development of the family. The struggle for families is to find a balance between time for free, child-centered play, academic enrichment and organized activities.

In addition, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has identified twelve key factors which influence population health: income and social status; social support networks; education; employment/working conditions; social environments; physical environments; personal health practices and coping skills; healthy child development; biology and genetic endowment; health services; gender; and culture (PHAC, 2001). While each of these is independently important, they are also interwoven, each impacting on the other. The determinant of population health, *healthy child development*, states: (a) that the early experiences of a child up to age six has the most significant impact on development; (b) low birth rates can be linked to tobacco and alcohol use during pregnancy; (c) a positive, loving attachment between an infant and adult helps to develop trust, self-esteem, emotional control and the ability to have positive relationships; (d) infants and children who are neglected or abused are at a higher risk of injury, behavioural, social and cognitive issues, and even death. The link

to health and well-being can be directly connected to a child's early childhood experiences in all domains (PHAC, 2001). This supports the work of Bronfenbrenner (2005) presented earlier in the literature review.

Considering all this, I suggest that as programs and services are developed, decision makers must remain aware of the many facets of family life, the challenges faced by families, alongside the desires that parents have for their children's positive early childhood experiences.

Policy Direction

The Council for Early Childhood Development (CECD) has proposed that the knowledge about early brain development and the importance of the early years must be shared and understood. To that end, the CECD has suggested that: (a) infancy and early childhood is not only the first but most critical phase of development; (b) that early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs can improve outcomes and the quality of life for children and are a benefit to children and their families, communities, and society; (c) that ECEC programs ought to be located in elementary schools, staffed by qualified, competent and adequately paid educators; (d) that meaningful early childhood reporting occur that provides information and accountability for investments; and finally, (e) that investing in early childhood development is a significant step in investing in the future of Canada (McCain et al., 2007). These recommendations suggest that by supporting preschool children and families through sound public and social policy backed by sustainable, accessible, and quality programs and services, is absolutely necessary for us as a society to address our responsibility for the next generation.

In addition, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009) clearly states that early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy needs to be systemic and integrate the various provisions of early childhood, universally accessible and partnered with the rest of the education system. The OECD (2009) suggest several points for consideration when developing public policy. The first point is that policy developers should place the child, and the well-being and learning of the child, at the core of all early childhood public policy focus. It continues by challenging that countries ought to aim for an early childhood education and care (ECEC) system that is supportive of lifelong and broad principals of learning, participation of parents, and open to all.

While this ECEC system must work within defined parameters, educators and services should have autonomy and flexibility to develop the best program for the children in their care. Early Childhood Education and Care Frameworks must be developed with all stakeholders involved in the education and care of the children and reflect current research and promising practices. In turn, public funding provided and the investments made must then be sufficient to meet the ECEC Frameworks developed. In doing this, policy developers must also work to improve the wages and working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff. Key to the success of any framework is the governance structure that will allow for accountability and quality assurances.

The services provided as a result of the framework should be broad and inclusive enough to appeal to all stakeholders while maintaining a commitment to support parents, enable women to work and aid in the inclusion of low-income and immigrant families (OECD, 2009). The quality of any program or service is enhanced when families and

communities are involved, and so the OECD would encourage ongoing efforts in the area of family and community involvement in a meaningful way. And lastly, countries must ensure that universal programmes for children with disabilities and disadvantages, along with appropriate funding and investment in quality services, will reduce poverty and the exclusion of marginalised children and families (OECD, 2009).

Friendly and Prentice (2009) suggest that a major transformation in public policy is required if Canada is ever to develop an early childhood education and care system. Required would be a commitment from the federal government, a long-term financial plan, a pan-Canadian collaboration in policy development, the creation of a national, as well as a provincial/ territorial infrastructure, a pan-Canadian human resource strategy, an innovation and participation fund, a research agenda with attention to evaluation and data collection, improvements to family policy and public education on ECEC.

Reaching balance among social policy, the rights of our children, and fiscal restraints is challenging. I believe our legacy will be measured in what we leave the children. If we are to become a society where there is equity for all, peace among neighbors, a sustainable environment, and health and well-being among our citizens, we must put our children first. But, in actual terms, what does putting children first mean?

Prince Edward Island's Children

Certainly it is critical that those involved with children have a genuine interest in their well-being, but does that mean the needs of children are coming first? Placing children first, will mean many different things to people. When considering what this means I expect "putting children first" comes in the context of the views, beliefs, values and the ethical principals of the adults. For some parents, policy makers, and community members, children should be seen and not heard, while for others children

belong and should be visible, involved and active in their community. Some would say children are the sole responsibility of their parents, while others, such as child advocates, researchers and economists (McCain et al., 2007) would argue we all have a role to play in the raising of our next generation. “Ultimately, acting on the principal of putting children first would take the stance that a worthy goal of education is to promote a more just and caring world. Then what better place to begin than in early childhood?” (Jalongo, 2008, p.392).

Investing in early childhood education and care (ECEC) would seem to make sense and could be viewed as placing children first or at the core of sound public policy. In PEI in 2007-2008 approximately \$9,830,767 was spent in the regulated early childhood education and care sector (ECEC in Canada, 2008). It is important to note that this total does not capture the complete investments made for this population, nor does it tell anything about support for children not in regulated care. Consideration would need to be made to reflect investments by the remaining provincial government departments, municipalities, and communities. The question remains, are these investments responding to the needs of Island children and parents? An important step in answering this question is to speak directly to parents.

Two significant policy initiatives have attempted to inform the policy direction for early childhood education and care in PEI; *For our Children, A Strategy for Healthy Child Development* (2000) and *The Early Years Report, Early Learning in PEI: An Investment in the Island's Future* (Flanagan, 2010).

Healthy Child Development Strategy

In 2000, *For our Children, A Strategy for Healthy Child Development* (HCD), was presented to the Provincial Government in Prince Edward Island. The Strategic

Model (see Figure 4) introduced within the strategy has guided the work of the PEI Children's Secretariat and its twelve Community Networks (*For our Children*, 2000). The Vision and Values of the strategic model were developed as a result of public consultation, including parents, on Healthy Child Development and are built on the Vision and Values of Canada's National Children's Agenda (*Public Report*, 1999) and reflect the ideas and beliefs of the citizens of Prince Edward Island at the time. In addition, the National Children's Agenda (*Public Report*, 1999) identified a set of broad societal outcomes for children; safety and security, good health, successful at learning and social belonging and responsibility. In addition, *For our Children* (2000) recognised that a child's brain is built from the beginning on. From birth throughout early childhood and into adulthood the architecture or makeup of the brain is developed. Positive experiences, supportive adults, and healthy environments have an impact on this development as does excessive stress, poverty neglect or abuse (Shonkoff, 2009). As well, there are specific times in the development of the brain, sensitive periods, that a child is most ready to learn in a particular area. This window of opportunity is not intended to indicate the only time a child can develop this skill, it simply means this is the optimal time (Thomas & Knowland, 2009). Under the strategic model, this knowledge of brain development is to be a consideration in the development of any program or service for children.

The Strategic Model developed to address Healthy Child Development in PEI is integrated in its nature, and incorporates components that support and inform each other:

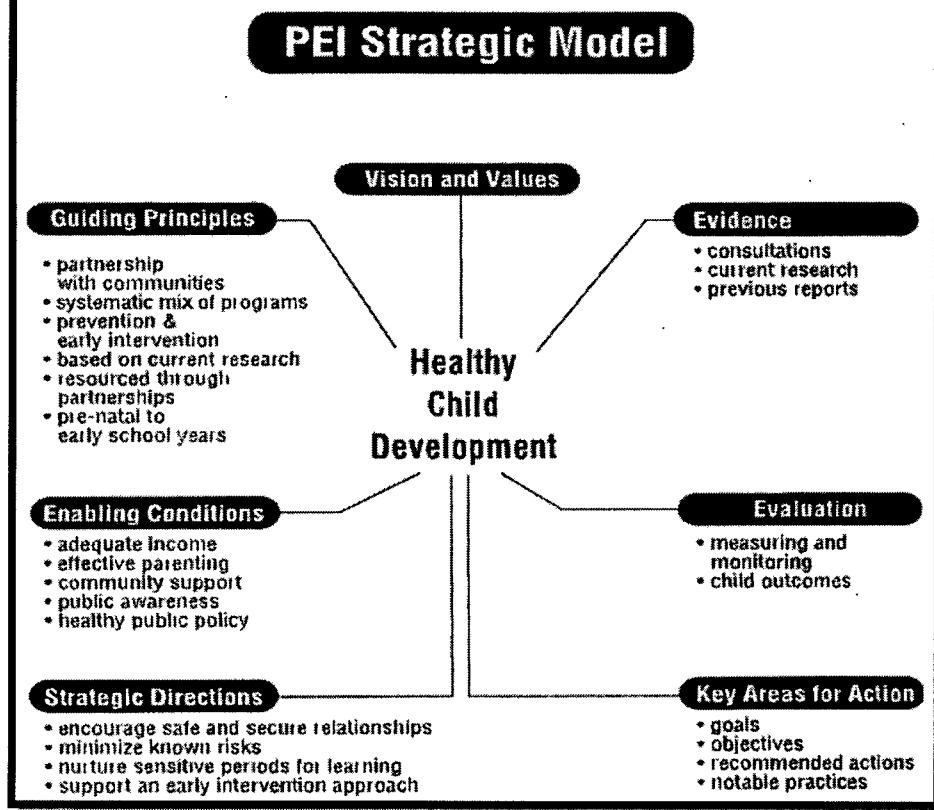


Figure 4. PEI Strategic Model, an integrated model to describe healthy child development in Prince Edward Island.

Framing what is provided for PEI children and families is based on the vision that PEI children will thrive in a loving, caring, understanding atmosphere (*For our Children*, 2000). Children will be valued as contributing individuals and be given a sense of hope for the future and pride in themselves and their community. It is hoped that Island children will grow to respect and protect the rights of others. To do this, they first must be valued, nurtured and loved. If given the opportunity PEI children will develop in all domains and grow to become contributing members of society. In addition, families will feel they are getting the support and respect they too need (*For*

our Children, 2000). One of the most basic values represented by the strategic model is that parents have the main responsibility for their children but that all Islanders share in the responsibility of supporting parents in that vital role (*For our Children*, 2000).

The mandate and timelines for the Healthy Child Development (HCD) Strategy have ended. The Children's Secretariat, introduced as a recommendation of the HCD strategy, continues. This is a group comprised of community organizations and government departments working together to raise awareness on issues related to children and families.

On May 28, 2010 the *Early Years Report* and Government's response, *Securing the Future For our Children*, were publicly released. The province of Prince Edward Island announced a historic change to ECEC in PEI; the early childhood sector would transition to an early learning system ("Press Release", 2010).

The Early Years Report

Building on current research and the results of a PEI parent survey, focus groups and interviews with PEI parents, focus groups with the ECEC sector, locally, nationally and internationally, written submissions, and key informant interviews, *The Early Years Report- Early Learning in PEI: An Investment in the Island's Future* (Flanagan, 2010), presents a framework for early childhood education and care in PEI. The Framework (Figure 5) gives direction on how the child and his/her family can be supported throughout the early years. The core values and principals the framework are built upon are those articulated throughout the data collection, as highlighted above, and include:

- ❖ a focus on the rights and best interests of the child;
- ❖ respecting parental choice;

- ❖ respecting and accommodating cultural and linguistic diversity in families and professionals;
- ❖ valuing strong and resilient families and communities;
- ❖ valuing and encouraging healthy relationships and partnerships between and among families and professionals;
- ❖ valuing decisions and policies which are guided by exemplary practice;
- ❖ valuing timely and appropriate screening, assessment and intervention; and
- ❖ valuing measuring and monitoring progress - for individual children and programs and services (Flanagan, 2010, p 16).

The proposed PEI Early Childhood Framework has the child at the center, supported by a common set of core values and principals and outlines a comprehensive range of programs and services which are intended to support children and their families.

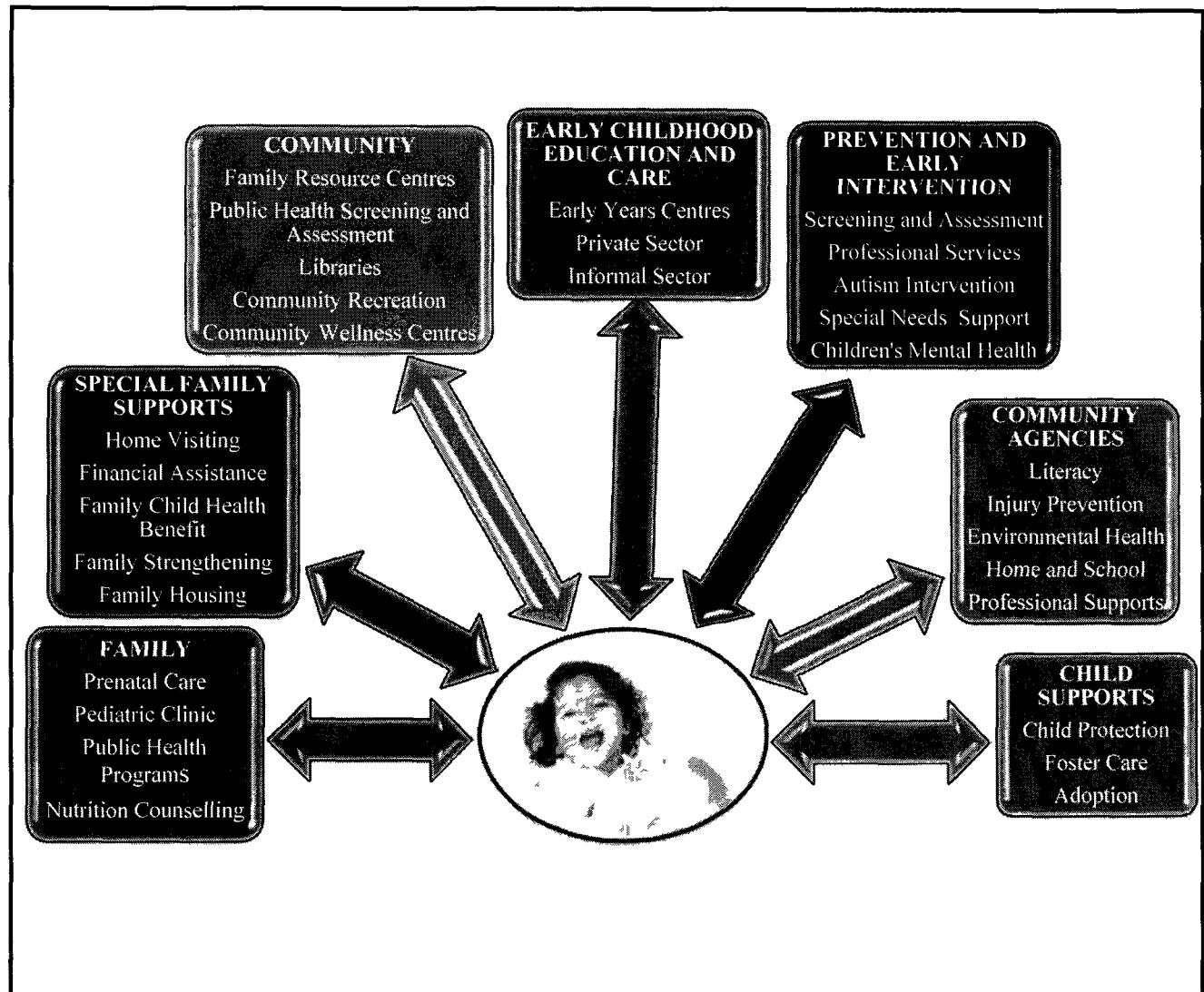


Figure 5. An Early Childhood Framework for PEI.

The vision (see Figure 6) for children proposed in the Early Years Report captures the views of all those who participated in the data collection process and is built upon the successes and lessons learned during the implementation of the Healthy Child Development Strategy (Flanagan, 2010).

Proposed Vision for Children:

Children in PEI are healthy and happy, curious and creative, playful and joyous. They are loved and respected, and are safe and secure in their families, homes and communities. Children are our collective responsibility. They are valued for who they are today, and as the future parents and leaders of tomorrow.

Figure 6. Proposed vision for children (from Flanagan, 2010, p. 15).

Fundamental to the *Early Years Report* is the creation of an early childhood system (see Figure 7). Building on the core values, principals and vision, the early childhood education and care sector in PEI will transition to an early childhood education and care system. By its very nature, a system implies access, governance and sustainability, which are key components to its very success.

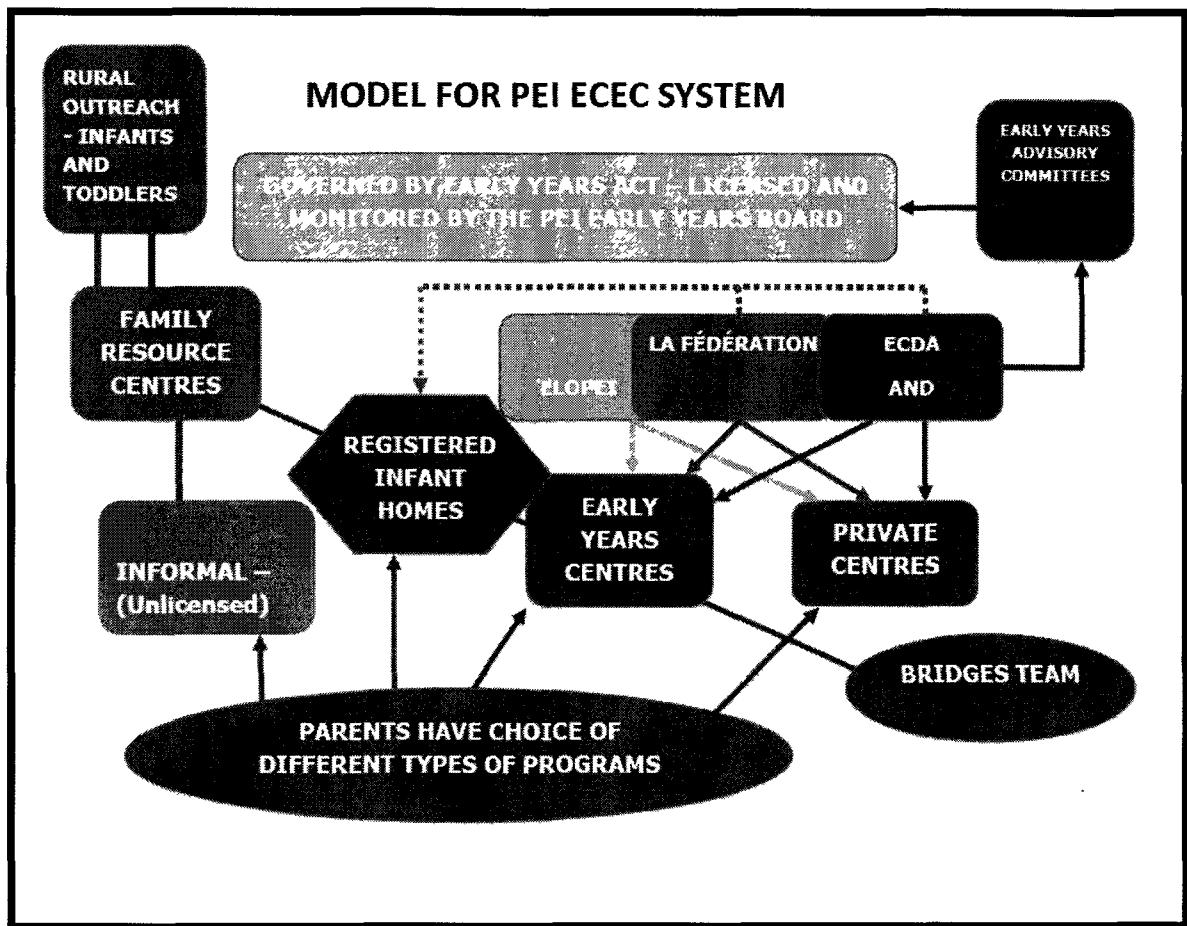


Figure 7. Model for creation of PEI early childhood system (Flanagan, 2010, p.35).

In addition to the vision, framework, and ECEC system model, Flanagan offers recommendations for the governance, quality, access (availability and affordability), and sustainability of the system, which are integrated and intended to:

- ❖ introduce a new model of support and delivery of programs and services for children and their families;
- ❖ recognize child development as complex and interwoven and must be seen in the context of the child's interactions with his/her family, friends, community, society and the world;

- ❖ acknowledge that we are all in this together and that no one sector (government or community) has all the answers- partnerships are necessary;
- ❖ understand that families are different and therefore no one program or service can respond to all families- parents need choice;
- ❖ propose a sustainable funding model for Early Years Centers; and
- ❖ establish a systematic approach to developing new programs and services.

(Flanagan, 2010, p. 87).

As a first response to the Early Years Report, Government has released its plan for early learning and care in PEI. Following the recommendation of the Early Years Report (Flanagan, 2010) to create a system which is of high quality, accessible, sustainable and respectful of parental choice this initiative will make strides in each of these areas (Preschool Excellence Initiative, 2010).

Securing the Future for Our Children: Preschool Excellence Initiative

The province of PEI has a plan to revitalize the early childhood sector, moving from a focus in childcare to a focus in early learning. Never in the history of our province has so much been done so quickly to improve educational opportunities for our children,” said Premier Ghiz. “This system is being built with one goal in mind – that, as a province, we can do a great deal more to prepare young Islanders for a lifetime of learning. The Preschool Excellence Initiative will achieve that goal by helping to build an accessible, sustainable and quality-driven system – while recognizing the importance of parental choice. (Press Release, 2010)

There are five groups who will benefit from this initiative; children, parents, early childhood educators, operators and all Islanders (*Preschool Excellence Initiative*,

2010). For children the initiative will: (a) provide high quality early learning opportunities; (b) stimulate and support the development of the whole child; (c) enhance a love of learning; (d) provide for play-based activities; (e) ensure trained staff; and (f) be inclusive of all children. For parents the initiative will (a) give them a voice through the creation of Parents' Advisory Committees; (b) regulate parent fees; (c) provide new and expanded infant care; (d) maintain access to licensed ECEC programs across the province; and (e) ensure quality early learning opportunities for their children. Early childhood educators will see (a) increased wages; (b) training and professional development support; (c) a curriculum framework; and (d) new opportunities for employment. For operators the initiative will: (a) have a range of business and program options; (b) ensure long term quality and sustainability; (c) address human resource issues and concerns; and (d) provide training and professional development. All Islanders will have access to early learning in local communities thus making it easier for young families to live where they choose. In addition it is expected that the initiative will support the growth of well-educated and successful Islanders (*Preschool Excellence Initiative*, 2010).

Recognizing that parents require options in programs and services for their children, parental choice is a cornerstone to the Preschool Excellence Initiative (*Preschool Excellence Initiative*, 2010). The beginning phase of the initiative will see the creation of Infant Homes and Early Years Centers. In addition to these two new options, parents will still have the option of private or informal (unregulated) childcare. Parents too will have opportunity to have direct input into the early learning program their child attends. The Early Years Centers are required to have Parent Advisory

Committees which are intended to give voice to the parents of the children attending the program.

A component of the rollout of the Preschool Excellence Initiative will include an evaluation, which is to be released in January 2012. Although the evaluation framework is still to be developed, one component of the evaluation will include a section on parental involvement. I believe that the success of the early learning system on PEI will be reflected in how successful we are at responding to, and providing for, the needs of preschool children and their parents, the early childhood educators, operators and communities.

Summary

The review of the literature makes it evident that the importance of relationships, sound public and social policy, education, and understanding the dynamics of modern family and community life are all critical if we are to understand and respond to the needs and expectations of Prince Edward Island's children and parents.

Based on the research findings to date, it could be argued that the healthy development of the child is directly connected to the health of the family and the strength of the community, and thus requires careful and specific consideration when programs and services are put in place to support children and their families (McCain et al., 2007; PHAC, 2001). The research also suggests that by understanding and using the insights we have on today's families, and which families utilize local programs and services, we can strengthen family involvement (Knoph & Swick, 2008). When developing or providing a program or service, it is critical to learn about the strengths and challenges of the families who may use, or are already using, the programs and services, provide a variety of ways for parents and families to be involved, and

continually assess the effectiveness and the quality of the relationships and programs or services being offered (Knoph & Swick, 2008). Parents are their child's first teachers and role models. The experiences children have in the early years will have an impact on how they grow and learn (McCain et al., 2007).

Parents are spending more time at work or engaged in work-related activities, thus there is less time for family. The National Survey of Parents of Young Children set out to understand the perspective of Canadian parents knowledge of children and parenting (Oldershaw, 2002). The survey results indicated that Canadian parents valued and liked their role as parents, and recognized the importance of the early years to their child's future development, but wanted more information on child development and parenting skills. They also identified the need for more support. On a provincial level, the Take 30 Benchmarking Research (2008), set out to understand parental perspectives on the influences in child development. Prince Edward Island families reported that spending time with their children was important, that they had enough information to be an effective parent, required childcare outside the home and wanted general information on child development.

The early years of a child's life are foundational to lifelong health, well-being and success. Brain development, environment and relationships matter to the healthy development of children (McCain et al., 2007). Optimal experiences in early childhood therefore are critical if children are to grow to become healthy, contributing adults. In addition, the early learning experience can also support the development of healthy families (Keyes, 2002).

So who is involved in the care and well-being of children? Parents, families, community, business, and governments, we all have a role in the development of healthy children and healthy families.

Identifying a Gap in the Research

Much of the research is broad in context and focuses on societal and family trends. According to Oldershaw (2002), little is known about what knowledge Canadian parents have in the areas of parenting, child development and their feelings about parenting. What then do we need to understand specific to our Prince Edward Island parents and their children? On Prince Edward Island over the last ten years significant studies have taken place which have called for parent input. Parents provided input into the development of *For our Children* (2000); Take 30 Benchmarking Research (2008); *Every Child a Better Future* (2009); and most recently with the development of the Early Years Report: *Early Learning in PEI: An Investment in the Island's Future* (Flanagan, 2010). Parents have consistently discussed, when asked, what mattered to them. In addition, parents of children with special needs on PEI have been incredible advocates for their children. Historically parents have formed or joined special interest groups, such as the Autism Society, when advocating on behalf of their children.

Although PEI has been working to ensure that programs and services provided for children and families adhere to the vision and values identified within this chapter (*For our Children*, 2000; *Preschool Excellence Initiative*, 2010), little data exists which would address our understanding of PEI parents' knowledge of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and in turn the decisions parents make with this knowledge.

Further research was required to specifically understand the perspective of PEI parents:

- 1) How do parents understand the importance of the early years and use this knowledge in their child's early childhood experiences?
- 2) How do parents believe they can have a more meaningful and influential role in decisions affecting their children's well being?
- 3) What are the principal concerns of families as their children grow from infancy to school entry?
- 4) What types of support systems exist to assist families in responding to these concerns?
- 5) What gaps do parents identify in the current programs/services provided?

A closer view and interpretation of the perspectives and priorities of Prince Edward Island parents, in relation to the five research questions, is the focus of this research. In the remaining chapters of this thesis I will present the research methods and survey findings, and suggest options that may be considered for future program and policy development.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Introduction: Capturing Their Voices

This survey research focused on understanding the perspective of parents of preschool children on Prince Edward Island. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of what parents believed to be important for them as parents and for their children as it related to understanding healthy development and parental support.

Utilizing surveys as a means of collecting data for research purposes has been used both in onetime surveys such as the PEI Take 30 Benchmarking Research, or in longitudinal research such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth.

Within the overall vision, purpose and goals for this research study, I employed a cross-sectional survey design approach (Creswell, 2008) to gather the data to help me explore parents' beliefs, values and understanding of the needs of their preschool children. In cross-sectional survey design the information is collected at one point in time from a predetermined group of participants (Frankel & Wallen, 2006). The survey used a variety of questions including open, closed and opinion-based questions, as well as several requesting demographic information. I did not seek participants in my capacity as Manager of Early Childhood Development and Kindergarten Programs with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, but rather, as a long time early childhood professional and educational researcher.

Cross-sectional survey design can be particularly effective when a large population is targeted and when a general overall picture of an issue is required. Such research tools can be used to describe trends, identify issues and determine individual opinions about policy issues, such as those in early childhood education (Creswell, 2008). Although surveys are used to collect information from a well-defined population,

careful consideration must be given to the design of the questions, to the layout of the survey and to the purpose of the data collection. Such issues as demographics, target population, questions and time-frame must be considered when deciding to use a survey format (Czaja & Blair, 1996). I chose to use a survey approach only, and not interview or hold focus groups, to allow the participants to be objective in their responses.

The aim and overall goal of the survey was to elicit the views of parents on childcare, parenting and child development. Developing these questions was particularly difficult because of the risk of multiple interpretations by the participants. The choice of question format (Economic and Demographic Research, 2003) proved to be critical in gaining the data to adequately respond to the research questions. “The survey research design is a very valuable tool for assessing opinions and trends. Even on a small scale, such as local government or small businesses, judging opinion with carefully designed surveys can dramatically change strategies” (The Scientific Method, 2008 para. 4).

Development of the Survey

The survey questions and comments were developed at approximately a grade eight reading level for ease of reading for participants. In developing my survey I reviewed the California Department of Education Child Development Division, Desired Results for Children and Families-Parent Survey (2003); The United Kingdom Every Child Matters- Parent Surveys (2004, 2007, 2008); the Kentucky Department of Education Parent survey (2009); the Municipal Child Care Services - Parent Survey (2009); the National Survey of Parents and Youth (Oldershaw, 2002); the PEI Early Childhood Parent Survey Report (Flanagan, 2010); and the Take 30 Benchmarking Research (2008). There were common themes running across these studies such as parents understanding of child development, parenting support and childcare. I chose to build

my survey using the common themes found in the literature to form the questions asked to participants.

The initial first draft of the parent survey was prepared based on the research questions and goals of the study. The draft parent survey was then reviewed by 10 parents whose children were in particular preschool age brackets. Parents were asked to review the survey questions, look for clarity and understanding in the stated questions, make comments and recommendations for revisions, changes, amendments, and so forth. The parents who piloted the survey recommended changes in section A to expand marital and educational status and to the order of questions in section C and D. No part of the survey was deleted. Parents felt the remainder of the survey questions were easy to understand and the survey easy to complete. The recommendations from parents were incorporated into the final survey (see Appendix A).

While developing the survey and information and parent letters, I contracted with the PEI Literacy Alliance to review the survey for plain language and to ensure it was presented in a clear and logical manner.

Survey Format

The survey was divided into 5 parts; A, B, C, D and E: Part A asked for general demographic information; Part B probed questions on the preschool children of the participants; Part C invited parents to rank in order of importance 4 separate clusters focusing on child development, childcare and family support; Part D of the survey asked parents to check all that applied in eight areas focusing on family support, childcare arrangements, parenting workshops, effective childcare programs, considerations when moving to a community, and services missing in the community. The final section, Part E, invited parents to respond to open ended questions and provide any final comments.

This data was coded to determine themes. The coding process involved identifying common or consistent terms or messages and color coding to identify themes. For example, I coded using the words "value", "consult", "consider" and "quality".

The overall focus for my research was to understand the perspective of parents of preschool children in relation to their understanding of healthy development and parenting supports. The research questions I was exploring and the subsequent survey questions asked to elicit the responses from parents break down as follows:

Research question:

- 1) How do parents understand the importance of the early years and use this knowledge in their child's early childhood experiences?

Survey questions:

Parents were asked to rank the following two areas from 1 to 5, 1 being the least important and 5 the most important: (a) dealing with a fussy eater; limiting TV or videos; having effective discipline techniques; selecting toys and books and knowing where to find information and help; and (b) helping my child learn letters, numbers, colors; understanding more about how my child learns; understanding more about how my child will grow; making healthy eating choices for my child; and training my child to go to the bathroom.

- 2) How do parents believe they can have a more meaningful and influential role in decisions affecting their children's well being?

Survey question:

There were three open ended questions in the survey. This one was aimed at answering this question. What is your advice to people who develop policies, programs or services for children?

3) What are the principal concerns of families as their children grow from infancy to school entry?

Survey questions:

Parents were again asked to rank the following from 1 - 5: (a) spending time with grandparents or extended family like aunts or cousins; celebrating special events like birthdays; eating family meals together; having regular family outings; and talking together or hanging out; and (b) my child has unstructured or free play for at least 30 minutes every day; my child and I have time to play together every day; my child has time to play alone every day; my child has time to play outdoors every day if the weather permits; and my child has regular time to play with friends.

4) What types of support systems exist to assist families in responding to these concerns?

Survey questions:

Parents were asked to "check all that apply" when asked the following questions: (a) Where do you go for parenting support? - family and friends, a professional such as a doctor, lawyer or public health nurse, family resource center, church or faith group, and early childhood program; (b) While at work or school, what types of childcare arrangements do you have? - regulated or licensed day care program, private babysitter, grandparent or other relative, my partner, and I'm at home; (c) If you were asked to design a useful workshop for parents what would you include? - time for parents to share ideas, tips on discipline, information on child development, time for questions, and information on play; (d) If you were asked to design a space for an effective childcare program what would you include? - high quality indoor play and learning space, area for my child to rest or nap, high quality outdoor play and learning space, staff room, and

parent room; (e) When you think about the community where you live, what made you decide to live there? Possible choices were close to schools, close to work, close to family and friends, playgrounds, and safety.

5) What gaps do parents identify in the current programs/services provided?

Survey question:

In response to this question, parents were asked to check all that apply when asked: Are there services that are missing in your community? - playground, medical services such as a doctor, pharmacy or clinic, library, childcare program, and other (please specify).

Parents were then asked to identify whether or not their child attended a childcare program, either regulated, unregulated or no, a parent was at home. If they answered yes, they were then asked to check all that applied when asked: What makes you feel welcome at your child's childcare program? Answer possibilities included the following: a caring supportive person, healthy meals and snacks, a well trained caregiver, clean and cherry spaces, and I kept informed about my child's development.

In addition to demographic information such as age, gender of participant, educational level, and so forth, the survey asked parents to consider any advice they would give program and policy developers, to comment on a statement regarding the value placed on children, and any other comments they would like to make. Chapter 4 of this study will explore the survey findings in detail.

Selection of Participants

The target population for this survey were PEI parents of preschool children from birth to age 5 years (Frankel & Wallen, 2006). For the purpose of this study preschool children were defined as (a) infants, children from birth to 18 months, (b)

toddlers, children from 19 to 35 months, and (c) preschoolers, children from 36 to 60 months of age.

To gain access to Prince Edward Island parents, I contacted and invited parents to take part through childcare programs in the three counties (Prince, Queens and Kings), family resource centers, Best Start workers, public health nurses and personal contacts. Points of contact included the directors of the childcare programs, the executive directors of two family resource centers, the Best Start co-ordinator, the supervisor of public health nursing in Queens County and several personal contacts with family, friends, and classmates. I made every effort to include parents of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with as even a distribution as possible among those three stages of development. As well, I sought participants representing a variety of perspectives: parents using regulated childcare, parents using private or unregulated care, stay-at-home parents, fathers and mothers from a variety of backgrounds, and with one or more children.

I believed that by capturing the views of such a diverse group of parents, I would be better prepared to answer my research questions and in turn better understand and articulate the voice of families.

My Role as Researcher

I am currently the Manager of Early Childhood Development and Kindergarten with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. My entire career has been devoted to working with, or on behalf of, preschool children and their families in one capacity or another. Over the years I have learned to never underestimate the power of voice, yet all too often the voices needed are not represented when decisions on programs and services affecting children are made. As well, I have made

assumptions about what I thought regarding a particular program or service, yet was not sure about parents' thoughts about the issue. The question consistently arose of how we as policy makers or program developers could use what the parents said to inform what we do. It is for these reasons that I chose to research the perspective of parents of preschool children in PEI.

For the purposes of this research, it was my responsibility to capture as many opinions, ideas and feedback from parents across P.E.I. as possible. It was also my responsibility to make every effort to develop a survey that was respectful and presented in such a way that the majority of parents would feel comfortable completing it. To help reassure participants, I provided my contact information and the contact information of my thesis advisors, should anyone want to contact any of us regarding the study. I indicated that my research study had been approved by the UPEI Research Ethics Board. In addition it was my responsibility to structure the survey in such a way that participants were free to leave any part of the survey blank that they did not wish to complete. Individual information or survey results remained anonymous and confidential. The names of participants were not asked. The demographic information I sought was specific to age, geographic location, gender, marital status, education and employment. As researcher, I was responsible for ensuring a transparent process of data collection and ensuring participants felt comfortable with the data collection methods.

Data Collection Procedures

In search of an understanding of what matters to PEI parents, in relation to parenting their children from infancy to preschool, I invited parents from across the province to participate. I distributed 600 hard-copies of the survey and gave parents the

option of completing the survey and returning it to me in a self-addressed envelope or of completing the survey online.

I sought participants by contacting early childhood centers, family resource centers, Best Start workers, public health nursing professionals, and personal contacts. I first made personal contact with the early childhood programs, public health nursing and family resource centers to explain the study and its purpose. This conversation was then followed up with an Information Letter (see Appendix B) outlining the study in detail (Shuttleworth, 2008). For the parents participating in the survey, I also included an Information Letter (see Appendix C) explaining the study and providing them with a stamped self-addressed envelope so they could mail the survey directly to me (Shuttleworth, 2008). Parents also had the option of completing the survey online.

In total I circulated 600 surveys across PEI. There were 218 (36.2%) surveys completed; 77 were mailed to my home and 141 were completed online. I entered those surveys mailed to me into SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com) for data analysis.

Data Management Strategies

I started my data collection in June 2009 and ended in October 2009. Surveys returned by mail were locked in a secure cabinet in my home office. No one else had access to this data. I transferred copies of the on-line survey results to a word processing program, and printed, and stored this in the same locked cabinet. A copy of the data is also stored on an external memory stick. All raw data will be maintained for three years from the date of completion of the study and then destroyed (June, 2013). At no time will I refer to the data for any purpose other than what was intended.

Data Analysis Strategies

Questions in the survey yielded qualitative and quantitative data and provided complementary perspectives to the study. The qualitative component looked at the "why" and "how" whereas the quantitative component measured demographics and statistical significance (Creswell, 2008). The analysis of qualitative data often requires the researcher to use inductive reasoning, drawing from what was shared to a logical conclusion. The challenge lies in sorting through the data, coding the data, understanding what the data has told you and in turn what you will tell others (Sanders, 1997). The analysis of quantitative data requires a more deductive perspective (Data Analysis On-Line Learning Programme, 2007). The quantitative data collected is nominal or categorical in nature. Using the Chi-square test for nominal data I explored several categories to determine the possible relationship among the variables (gender, age, educational level, income and marital status) and the probability of the results occurring in the general population (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

As data was collected, I highlighted the demographic information on a spreadsheet, while beginning a preliminary analysis of the findings. This description of the participants is the beginning of data analysis (Creswell, 2008). Once I had a clear picture of who the participants in the study were, I began to code the qualitative data in the open-ended sections of the survey to explore emerging themes. At that point I began to tease out the themes that formed the basis for the final discussions.

In an attempt to deepen my analysis and provide categorical data, I completed a statistical analysis of the survey findings utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). I considered the age, sex, marital status, income, number of children, special needs of children, views of child development, urban, rural, family and

community supports when analysing the data. I began to code the data and cross reference for age, gender, marital status, income and urban or rural living. I was able to look at the data from several vantages. I discovered I had rich quantitative data from the parents from across PEI, (132 participants urban; 86 participants rural) who completed the survey, with which to answer several of my research questions.

Upon review of the data I began to look for gaps in the findings and my ability to then answer the five research questions posed. I checked to see if all the questions had been answered and if the responses were complete. In addition, I began the process of adding to the literature review. I began to compare my findings with work reported by other researchers in the literature.

The usefulness of the research findings, however, lies in part with my ability to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the research and the readers' interest, attachment and experience to the phenomenon of parenting (Sanders, 1997).

Trustworthiness Features

As part of the research process, it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability of the research (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Determining the trustworthiness of the report is basic. Have I been successful in answering the research questions and in turn meeting the purpose of the proposed study? How will this piece of work add to the existing literature? Has the rigor of the data and research collected together provided clarity to the phenomenon of parenting? Guba (1981) outlines four aspects or criteria (see Figure 8) for evaluation of research and then links those to either qualitative or quantitative research methods.

Aspect	Qualitative Approach or Naturalistic Term	Quantitative Approach or Scientific Term
Truth value	Credibility	Internal Validity
Applicability	Transferability	External Validity
Consistency	Dependability	Reliability
Neutrality	Confirmability	Objectivity

Figure 8. Scientific and naturalistic terms appropriate to the four aspects of trustworthiness.

The truth value considers how confidence can be established in the findings; applicability considers how the findings may be applicable in other contexts or with other participants; consistency considers if the findings would be consistently repeated if the study were redone with similar participants under similar circumstances; and neutrality considers if the findings are those of the participants and of the questions asked and not that of the researcher (Guba, 1981).

Credibility

The credibility of qualitative inquiry depends on three distinct but related inquiry elements: rigorous methods for doing fieldwork; credibility of the researcher and a philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry. The credibility is not as dependent on the sample size so much as the richness and depth of the data and on my ability as researcher to analyze the data and report the findings (Patton, 2002).

Throughout the data collection it was necessary to ensure I reached a saturation point in the data collection before deciding to end the data collection phase of the study.

I extended the survey deadline for two weeks which did allow for the collection of approximately 30 additional surveys. In doing this, I was successful in achieving a 36.2% response rate. I believe this allowed for a representative perspective and brought voice to Island families. Throughout the research process, I was in regular contact with my advisors seeking feedback on the process. My own credibility as a researcher was reliant on my willingness to learn all I could about research and data collection and analysis. I remained committed to this learning, recognising the direct impact it would have on my credibility as a researcher and overall thesis.

Transferability

How can the findings of a qualitative research study be generalized? In 1980 Cronbach and Associates (as cited by Patton, 2002), suggested a balance between the depth and breadth of the study, a sense of realism and control so that one can pull out other applications of the findings. “Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings” (Trochim, 2006, p.15).

The transferability of my research lies in part with me and with others who may chose to use the findings. How I have chosen to report the findings also has a significant impact on the transferability of the study. I made every effort to ensure the data collection and analysis reached saturation and that I presented the findings in a meaningful way, keeping in mind a variety of audiences; parents, educators, and program and policy developers. Through the data collection, analysis and reporting of the findings, it is likely the research could be replicated and/or the findings applied to a similar circumstance, but this decision will be the responsibility of the reader. The reader must determine if the findings presented would be applicable in another context.

Within the context of qualitative research each researcher brings a unique perspective to the study.

Dependability

It was my responsibility as researcher to account for the data collection and the legitimacy of the participants. I kept a research journal, maintained notes on the process and sought feedback from my thesis advisors to discuss the rigor and depth of the research collection, analysis and reporting. As well I tracked the decisions I made about the conduct of the research through my research journal. Participants had the opportunity to contact me if they had any questions or concerns regarding the study. In addition participants were provided the contact information for my thesis advisors and the research ethics committee within the university. Since the participants are anonymous I am not able to provide them with a copy of the thesis or a synthesis of the findings however participants are able to contact me directly should they wish to view the final thesis report.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others (Trochim, 2006). There are a number of strategies I used. I documented in great detail the data collection process. I sought input and direction from my thesis advisors throughout the process to discuss the data collection and analysis. Throughout the data collection and particularly in the analysis it was imperative that I remained aware of the biases I brought to the process. It was my responsibility as researcher to not make assumptions from the data but instead report accurate findings. Copies of all data sources were maintained so that an audit of the material could be

completed and the accuracy of the findings reviewed. The data results and discussion are reviewed in detail in the following chapters.

Delimitation of the Survey

As with any research, a possible limitation may be the access to data, in this case the number of Prince Edward Island parents who agreed to participate in this study.

While every attempt was made to include a range of cultures, family structure, socio-economic-status, gender, age and geographical location of families, it was not possible to ensure that the views of all PEI parents were represented in the findings.

Participants were not given the option of "not applicable" or "skip" when completing the survey on-line. As a result, parts of the survey showed up as incomplete when in fact it may not have been. For example, there were 3 pages on-line that asked about the children. If a participant was only reporting on one child the other two pages or responses showed up as incomplete. In addition, several participants stated that they found the ranking section difficult if the question did not apply to them. For example, in one of the sets of questions I asked participants to rank, in the order of importance from 1-5 the following; helping my child learn letters, numbers, colors; understanding more about how my child learns; understanding more about how my child will grow; making healthy eating choices for my child; and training my child to go to the bathroom. Some participants stated in the written feedback that this was difficult if their child was already toilet trained. Even considering this challenge, 92% of the surveys returned were complete.

Conclusion

The quantitative analysis of the data from this study enabled me to determine any statistically relevant differences when considering five demographic variables. Since qualitative research does not have statistical tests to determine the significance of the study, it is the responsibility of the researcher to interpret what has been gathered and present this in a cohesive manner (Sanders, 1997).

I will review the findings of the study in the following chapter and discuss the conclusions drawn from these results in chapter five. In addition, I will make suggestions based on these conclusions.

CHAPTER FOUR: PARENT SURVEY FINDINGS

The intent of this research was to learn what parents of preschool children view as important in relation to their child's early childhood experiences and to identify any possible gaps in services or programs offered by community organizations or government departments. I was also interested in learning about concerns parents might have in relation to child development, childcare and early childhood education in general and whether or not parents believed they had a meaningful voice in program or policy developments which impact children and families. My research questions again were:

- 1) How do parents understand the importance of the early years and use this knowledge in their child's early childhood experiences?
- 2) How do parents believe they can have a more meaningful and influential role in decisions affecting their children's well being?
- 3) What are the principal concerns of parents as their children grow from infancy to school entry?
- 4) What types of support systems exist to assist parents in responding to these concerns?
- 5) What gaps do parents identify in the current programs/services provided?

As discussed earlier in this thesis, I used a comprehensive parent survey to explore the research questions. In this chapter, I present the findings, according to the research questions, and identify key themes which emerged from the data collected in the parent survey.

Statistical Significance

A considerable amount of quantitative data was collected. It was important for me to understand as a researcher if the results were simply by chance or if there was any significance based on the variables considered. By completing CHI-Square Tests using the software program Statistical Analysis for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the survey data, parts C and D, were coded and analysed for statistical significance (Keller, 2009). The variables considered for this analysis were gender, education of participant, age of participant, total household income, and marital status (Appendix D) of the participants. In total this represented analysis of 53 survey questions. Where statistical significance is relevant to the research questions, I will report the findings.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will share participants' responses to the survey, beginning with an overview of the demographic information (Parts A and B), followed by the analysis of the research questions (Part C, D, and E of the survey).

Demographic Information

The following two sections provide an overview of the survey participants and their preschool children.

Participant Overview

This first section provides a general overview of the survey participants based on gender, age, education level, employment status, and income.

A total of 218 surveys were completed. The majority of participants (90%) were female. The majority of participants also reported being married (76.9%), with a university education (52.6%) and with a combined household income of over \$60,000 annually (57.9%). The language spoken at home was primarily English, with some speaking French and individual participants indicating Spanish, Russian and

Telugu(Indian language). When asked whether they lived in a town or in the country, 52% of the participants reported living in a town, 36% in the country and 12% did not respond. The majority of the participants were between 31 - 40 years old (see Figure 9).

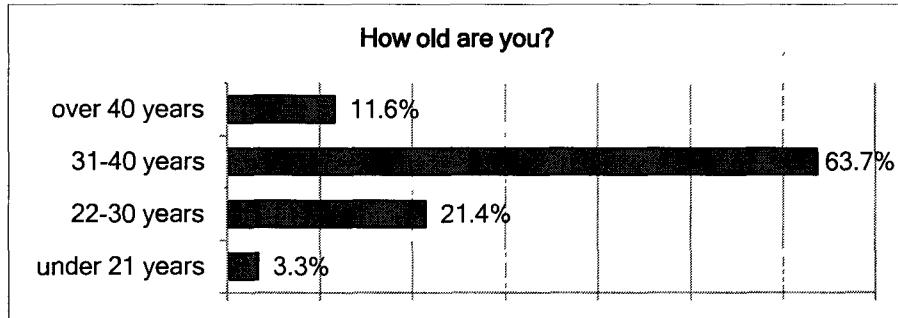


Figure 9. Age of Participants.

Seven of the participants were female under the age of 21. The majority of these participants earned under \$20,000 while half were stay-at-home parents.

Forty-four of the female participants were between 22 and 30 years of age. Of these, 72% were employed, 23% were stay-at-home parents and 5% were unemployed. Twenty-six percent of these women reported earnings under \$20,000; 20% between \$20,000 - \$40,000, 26% between \$40,000 - \$60,000 and 28% over \$60,000.

One hundred and eighteen of the female participants were between 31 and 40 years of age. Of these, 90% were employed, 8% were stay-at-home parents and 2% were unemployed. Seventy-three percent of these women reported earnings over \$60,000; 16% between \$40,000 - \$60,000; 7% between \$20,000 - \$40,000 and 4% reported earnings under \$20,000. Fourteen of the female participants were over 40 years of age. Of these, 86% were employed, 7% were stay-at-home parents and 7% were unemployed. Eight percent of these women reported earnings under \$20,000; 31% between \$20,000 - \$40,000; 0% between \$40,000 - \$60,000 and 61% over \$60,000.

Twenty-one of the participants were male. Twelve percent of these men were

between 31 and 40 years of age. Of these, 83% were employed and 17% were stay-at-home parents. Nine percent of the men reported earnings under \$20,000; 0% between \$20,000 - \$40,000; 18% between \$40,000 - \$60,000 and 72% over \$60,000.

Eight-two percent of the men were over 40 years of age. Of these, 75% were employed and 25% were unemployed. None of the men reported earnings under \$20,000; 17% reported earnings between \$20,000 - \$40,000; 17% between \$40,000 - \$60,000 and 77% over \$60,000. A small percentage, 11%, of the participants did not report earnings. When asked their employment status, over 95% of the 218 participants reported being employed at some point throughout the year (see Figure 10).

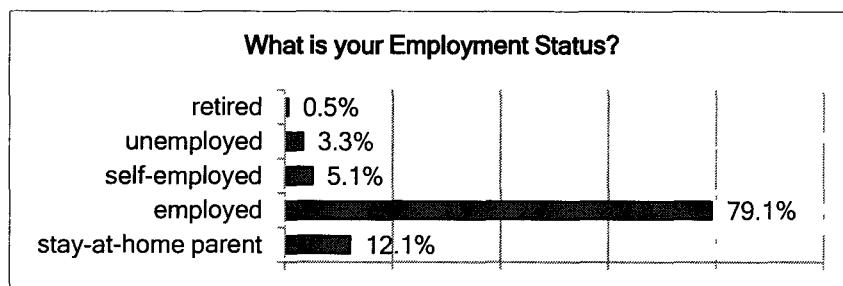


Figure 10. Employment Status of Participants.

Of these, 80.8% were employed full-time; 13.5% part-time and 5.7% were seasonally employed while 9.6 % work shift-work. It is important to note that 12.1 % of all participants reported being stay-at home parents. The majority of participants reported a total household income (see Figure 11) of over \$60,000 annually.

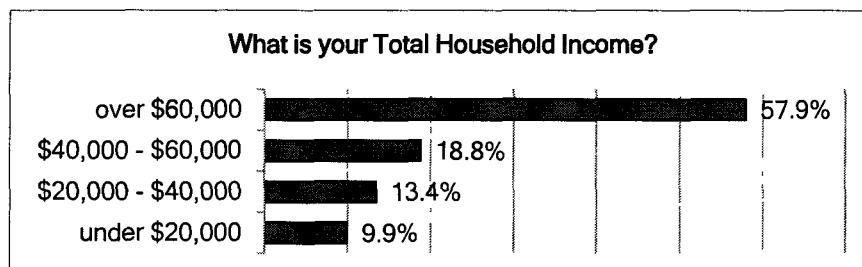


Figure 11. Total Household Income of Participants.

When asked the level of education completed 83.3% of the participants reported completing post-secondary education (see figure 12).

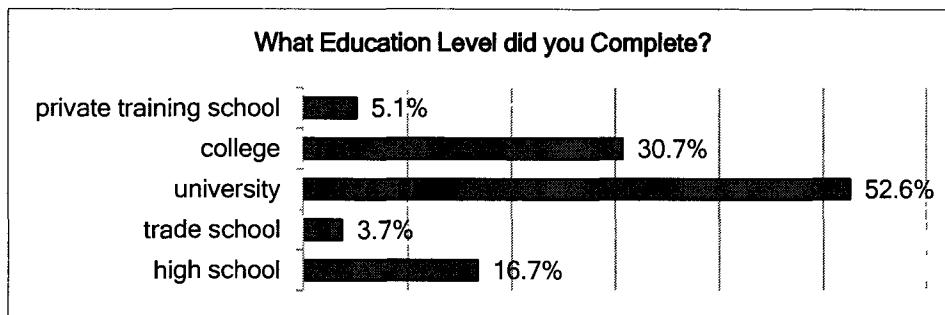


Figure 12: Participants' Education Level.

The majority of participants (86.6%) were either married or living in a common-law relationship (see Figure 13).

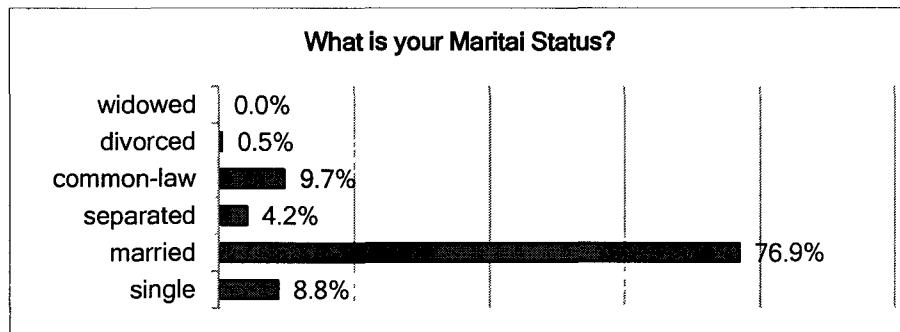


Figure 13. Marital Status of Participants.

In summary, the majority of participants were married, had completed post-secondary education, had a combined household income of over \$60,000.

Overview of Participants' Children

This section provides an overview of the participants' children. Parents were asked to highlight any developmental or health concerns they had about their child, and identify the supports or services required. Participants reported a total of 184 first-born children; 52% of these children were male and 48% were female; respondents reported having 77 second-born children; 64% of these children were male and 37% were female.

Finally, participants reported 17 third-born children; 65% of these children were male and 35% were female. On average, 87.5% of parents reported having no developmental or health concerns, including allergies, intellectual challenges, illnesses or physical challenges for their children (see Figure 14).

Participants were also asked to identify any "other" developmental or health concerns of their children. Respondents (15.13%) then identified either asthma, anxiety, speech delay, autism, low birth weight, fine and gross motor delays, attention deficit disorder, allergies to medication, autism, heart disease, failure to thrive, feeding issues, or cleft palate as concerns.

First Child		
Does your child have any developmental or health concerns?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
none	84.5%	163
allergies	13.5%	26
intellectual challenge	1.6%	3
illness	1.6%	3
physical challenge	1.6%	3
Other (please specify)		20

Second Child		
Does your child have any developmental or health concerns?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
none	84.0%	68
allergies	13.6%	11
intellectual challenge	0.0%	0
illness	2.5%	2
physical challenge	0.0%	0
Other (please specify)		11

Third Child		
Does your child have any developmental or health concerns?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
none	94.1%	16
allergies	5.9%	1
intellectual challenge	0.0%	0
illness	0.0%	0
physical challenge	0.0%	0
Other (please specify)		2

Figure 14. Developmental or Health Concerns of Participants Children.

The overwhelming majority of parents (ranging from 87% - 89.5%) reported that they did not require any special services or supports (see Figure 15) for their child(ren). However, the parents of those children who did require services were concerned with wait times, timely assessments, and early interventions.

First Child		
Does your child require any special services or supports to meet his or her needs?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
none	87.0%	168
speech language pathologist	9.8%	19
occupational therapist	2.1%	4
doctor	4.1%	8
special needs assistant	1.6%	3
physiotherapist	1.6%	3
Other (please specify)		12

Second Child		
Does your child require any special services or supports to meet his or her needs?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
none	89.5%	77
speech language pathologist	3.5%	3
occupational therapist	1.2%	1
doctor	9.3%	8
special needs assistant	1.2%	1
physiotherapist	1.2%	1
Other (please specify)		6

Third Child		
Does your child require any special services or supports to meet his or her needs?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
none	89.5%	17
speech language pathologist	0.0%	0
occupational therapist	0.0%	0
doctor	10.5%	2
special needs assistant	0.0%	0
physiotherapist	0.0%	0
Other (please specify)		2

Figure 15. Services or Supports Required for Participants Children.

When asked to identify any "other" services or supports required for their children, parents identified the need for an autism consultant, physiotherapist, nutritionist, paediatrician, play therapist, paediatric allergist, intensive behavioural intervention therapist, dental and plastic surgeon, a medical team from the IWK Children's Hospital in Nova Scotia, and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Prince Edward

Island. Puffers, special dietary needs, and glasses were also identified. Overall, parents did not report any developmental or health concerns for almost 90% of the 278 children. The majority of the children were preschoolers with 26.2 % of the children in the infant category (birth -18 months), 15.4% toddlers (19-35 months) and 58.4% preschoolers (36-60 months).

In summary, close to 89% of participants had no major developmental or health concerns for their children. This first section has provided a general overview of the participants and their children. In the following section I will report specifically on the research questions and findings from the survey.

Analysis of Research Questions

The first two sections of the parent survey, parts A and B, asked questions about general demographic information which have been reported. Each of the remaining three parts of the survey, C. D and E, were intended to elicit responses from parents to answer the five research questions. In part C participants were asked to rank various areas of early childhood. I then used this data to answer the first and third research questions. In part D of the survey participants were asked to check all that applied to them when asked specific questions. I then used this data to answer the fourth and fifth questions. In the final section of the survey, part E, participants were asked to respond to a question, to a statement, and to provide any final comments. This qualitative data was then used to answer the second and third research questions.

As indicated in the methods section, the data was also analysed for statistical significance using the variables of income, education, marital status, gender and age measured against the responses to the survey questions. Findings from this analysis will also be reported in the following questions.

Research Question 1:

How do parents understand the importance of the early years and use this knowledge in their child's early childhood experiences?

Parents seemed eager to learn about the various stages of their child's development and how best to support their children. As children moved out of the infant and toddler stages parents reported wanting to learn more about how to prepare their child for kindergarten and school. Since the majority of the children were between 3 and 4 years of age, it was logical that parents would be focusing on their child beginning formal education and entering kindergarten. Parents (31.7%) ranked wanting to understand how their child learns as most important to them, helping their child to learn letters and numbers ranking next, and followed by making healthy food choices for their children (see Table 1).

	Ranking %	1 (least important)	2	3	4	5 (most important)	missing (%)	responses
Research Question 1								
Survey section								
Fussy eater	37.6	16.1	16.5	11.5	7.3	11	194	
Limit TV	17	23.4	27.1	16.1	6.9	9.6	197	
Discipline	6	5	10.6	18.8	50.5	9.2	198	
Selecting toys	13.8	24.8	20.2	22.5	10.1	8.7	199	
Finding information	16.1	20.6	17	22.5	15.6	8.3	200	
Letters etc.	7.3	14.2	19.7	26.6	23.4	8.7	199	
How child learns	6.4	12.8	21.1	18.3	31.7	9.6	197	
How child grows	17	36.7	16.1	16.5	3.7	10.1	196	
Healthy eating	3.7	15.6	24.3	22.5	25.2	8.7	199	
Toilet training	56	10.1	10.	6.9	7.3	9.6	197	

Table 1. *Survey Ranking for Research Questions One.*

The results of the analysis would indicate that in the area of child development parents are most interested in: (a) learning about discipline; (b) helping their child with intellectual or cognitive skills such as letter recognition; (c) learning how their child

learns; and (d) healthy eating strategies. It would be important to note that the results may have been different if the majority of children had been younger. It may be assumed that because the children are older and getting closer to starting school that the top areas of focus for the participants in the study would concern understanding how their child learns and academic or cognitive skills such as letter and number concepts. Also the participants reported few health or developmental issues for their children.

Although, "tips on discipline" was the number one topic overall by participants, the greatest discrepancy or statistical significance in this particular section showed up in the topic area of "play", ($\chi^2(2)= 6.061^a$ $p< .048$), with 71% of participants with a high school education, 45.1% with college, private training, and/or trade school and 56.1% of parents with a university education all indicating play as their top choice. This suggests that parents with high school education place a higher value on understanding play than participants with a college or university education.

Parents also indicated a need to be more informed about where to access information. Parents were less concerned with toilet training, perhaps due to the ages of the children, and dealing with a fussy eater. Instead they were more focused on having effective discipline techniques and limiting TV and video use. The data seemed to indicate that parents had a general understanding of the value of nutrition, literacy and general academic skills to a child's overall development.

Research Question 2:

How do parents believe they can have a more meaningful and influential role in decisions affecting their children's well being?

Survey participants were asked what advice they would have for people who develop policies, programs or services for children and families. There were 135 responses to this question. A very clear theme, the need for ongoing communication and parental input, emerged as a result of my analysis of the data. Over 45% of the respondents indicated that decision-makers needed to find ways to hear from parents. Participants reported that all too often decisions were made that would affect them as families yet it appeared little consideration had been taken to completely understand the impact to families. Participants stated that open dialogue with families was important, but that follow through on the discussion and commitment was also an indicator that their perspectives were attended to and understood. Participants also felt that it was important for everyone involved in program or policy development, including parents, to work together.

The following quotes are from participants in the parent survey. The quotes are taken from the open-ended survey questions. Participants appeared eager to provide comments and were specific on the advice they had to offer. The following quotes are a representation of the statements made by participants.

Participants' comments:

“Make sure that the people who are making the decisions have a good grasp of early childhood development. Seek out assistance from those in the field and parents / families. Look at the whole picture - what is missing, what services are being duplicated and ‘don’t fix what isn’t broken’.”

“More family input into decisions and changes, incorporate play in learning, more accessible hours, meeting shift work needs and educated instructors (College and University level).”

Survey Participant

"Open dialogue with parents. Follow through on policies."

"My advice would be that the parents [sic] voice is the most important. Parents want to know that their children are safe and being looked after in a caring yet structured environment where learning happens through play."

"Parents should always be involved."

"When planning programs/policies consider the needs of the family (parents and children combined). There needs to be more focus on supporting parents."

"Open communication, feedback from parents promoted."

"Listen to and respond the needs on Parents and Families. Clearly communicate and provide good information to parents to help them make responsible choices for the children."

"Talk to parents...they know firsthand what they are going through and the supports that they and their children require."

"Keep the working family in mind and the feedback in abundance."

"To consult with families with varying socio-economic backgrounds."

"Try to reach out to as many parents of young children as possible, so that all children can benefit from such programs and services equally."

"Involve all key stakeholders, ie government, parents, educators, even kids depending on age. Consultative approaches."

"I think it is important to ensure that when you are asking for public input, or explaining changes to the public, that things are explained in a variety of ways. Not all parents understand what is available to them now, and not all can decipher press releases etc - and sometimes the plain language used is not really all that plain if you have no background information to help put it in context. Also, to listen to the professionals who are already working with children and families. Sometimes the "trenches" see clearly where policy changes are going to cause problems, where policy makers who are not actually doing the work may be unaware of potential snafu's."

The messages from participants were clear and consistent: they want to be involved and have their point of view acknowledged in a meaningful way by policy and program developers. Recent examples of how provincial policy development involved parents included the *Take 30 Benchmarking Survey* (2008) and the *Flanagan Parent Survey* (2010). Both surveys had high participatory rates thus confirming parent interest in being involved.

In summary, participants in this study believed they could have a more meaningful and influential role in decisions affecting their children's well being through

effective, ongoing communication, and by having opportunity to provide input into program and policy development. Participants noted that decision-makers need to "think outside the box" when it came to program and policy development and work to ensure the perspective from varying family types was collected.

Research Question 3:

What are the principal concerns of parents as their children grow from infancy to school entry?

In general participants wanted to ensure that the programs and services offered for them and their children were based on current research, appropriate for all children and families, and accessible. Parents consistently commented on the need to involve families in the planning and to keep the lines of communication open at all levels.

Participants reported that time together simply "hanging out" with their children was incredibly important. Participants valued their time together as a family "playing" and parents also saw the need for their children to have time to play both with friends and on their own. Family meal times were also important to participants as was spending time with family members and friends (see Table 2). Sauve (2009) suggested that families may find it difficult to strike a healthy home and work balance. The findings from this study support the notion that parents are striving for a more balanced home and work life.

"It is important to be sure you have the most up-to-date and knowledge based decisions when developing policies and creating programs and services for children and families."

Survey Participant

	Ranking %	1 (least important)	2	3	4	5 (most important)	missing (%)	responses
Research Question 3								
Survey section								
Time with grandparents family	6.9	23.4	18.8	18.3	13.3	19.3	176	
Celebrating special events	36.7	22.5	11.9	9.6	7.3	11.9	192	
Family meals	7.8	11.9	23.4	18.3	28.9	9.6	197	
Family outings	15.1	21.6	20.6	19.7	12.8	10.1	196	
Talking hanging out	12.8	10.1	15.6	24.3	28	9.2	198	
Unstructured free play	10.1	26.6	17.4	19.3	6.4	20.2	174	
Play together	6	5	13.8	17.4	49.1	8.7	199	
Play alone	43.1	27.5	10.6	5	3.7	10.1	196	
Play outdoors	4.6	11.9	20.6	29.8	24.3	8.7	199	
Play friends	17.4	20.2	27.1	19.3	7.3	8.7	199	

Table 2. *Survey Ranking for Research Questions Three.*

In addition to the open-ended question, "What is your advice to people who develop policies, programs or services for children and families?", participants were asked to respond to the statement "In Prince Edward Island we value our children" (139 responses). Several additional themes emerged from the responses to both the question and the statement: (a) quality of programs and services offered; and (b) accessible programs and services / affordable childcare programs.

Quality of Programs and Services Offered

Approximately 60% of survey participants commented on the quality of services for children and families. Parents wanted to ensure that the programs and services offered were of high quality, grounded in what is best for children, regulated and inspected. Specific issues that participants identified focused on the need for a better paid early childhood workforce, stricter childcare regulations and enforcement, more professionals such as speech language pathologists and occupational therapists, and the maintenance of successful programs and services already in existence. Approximately

10% of participants spoke about the positive experiences they had with both the regulated or licensed childcare sector and the family resource centers.

The following quotes are representative from participants of the parent survey. Participants appeared eager to provide comments and were specific on their suggestions to improve the quality of programs and services provided for children and families.

Participants' comments:

"Please consider the adult/child ratio closer... class sizes are too large in certain communities... regular follow up and meetings with parents."

"Must make learning fun and allow children to have a choice in what they are doing."

"Make sure the learning is designed around the child's needs. Not that of a policymaker."

"Consider the needs of all children, not just those who are gifted and/or have special needs."

"Child centered, age-appropriate, developmentally appropriate, play based, hands on, family involvement, informative for parents, welcoming, caring, safe, warm are key elements."

"If we could stay on top of the newest things and ways to do things. More up to date with things."

"You can never be too tough or thorough or strict when setting regulations or guidelines... ie, don't allow non-nutritious foods in childcare settings (like jello), increase the staff-to-child ratio on field trips, etc. It will take the guess work away from those who may not have the best judgement."

"I'm concerned about the staff/child ratio in most childcare facilities. Government needs to step up and cover more of the cost so that we can have better ratios and better paid high-quality Early Childhood Educators caring for children."

"We need more professional services for children with special needs so that we can focus on early intervention. In addition to more ECEs, we need more Speech-Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Psychologists, Social Workers, etc. who work with children and families with special needs or those who are at-risk for emotional, behavioural, or learning issues".

" We need to address wait times for assessment & intervention. Children should not need to wait when time is crucial! Early childhood educators and support staff need to be paid for the valuable service they provide. SNA's & IBI tutors need higher wages so we can keep/obtain qualified & dedicated staff doing these ++ important jobs with our most vulnerable children."

"Provide forums/groups/etc for parents to find support. Ie, playgroups are a great venue for meeting and comparing notes with other parents, but they're all on weekday mornings when many of us are working. Would love to see a mom club that meets regularly, not necessarily your friends, but other moms, that's organized and perhaps there's a facilitator or an educator present. I often attended such sessions when I was on maternity leave and would love to have a similar resource that's held in evenings, focussing on issues we are dealing with (toilet training, night wakings, sibling rivalry, finding me-time, etc)."

"To have services that have well qualified and friendly, caring people working there that truly care about children."

"I would continue to keep what is already in place such as family resource centers, daycares etc and services such as OT, special needs assistants etc."

Participants focused on such things as the need for the early childhood or childcare learning environment (inside and out) to be developed according to such quality indicators as child-staff ratios and the learning needs of the children. As reported above, participants of this study had very specific thoughts when it came to the quality of the programs and services provided.

Accessible Programs and Services / Affordable Childcare

In addition to the quality of the programs and services offered to children and/or parents, participants were concerned with access and affordability of childcare. Over 62% of participants indicated that access to programs and services and affordable

childcare was of concern to them. Again, participants were specific and clear on identifying their needs. The following are representative comments from the parent survey.

Participants' comments:

"We need to put time and money into developing a comprehensive ECE program that focuses on supported children and families especially on the 0-6 range."

"Most programs here are delivered on Tues, Wed, and Thur even though most people who work part-time have Monday and/or Fridays off. This makes it difficult to be involved in programs other than on the weekend."

"We need more government supported childcare centers. Qualified early childhood caregivers should earn good incomes but many families cannot afford to pay larger fees. Centers should be subsidized so that centers can be staffed with quality teachers/caregivers."

"We need to be aware of the limited income of parents in rural areas. If we are to encourage women to be more integrated in the workforce, we need to provide quality childcare."

"Regulate all you can and keep things accessible."

"Hardly any spaces for children ages 1-2 years old - also sounds tough for shift-working single parents to find childcare."

"Investments in the early years will support many PEI families, schools and communities. Early intervention programs could be set up earlier in children's lives. Stepping up inspections will enforce PEI to raise the bar on quality, education and care go hand in hand. We need everyone to join in the rights of the child. having more educational parenting courses in communities will also increase awareness in children's needs, growth and development. Policy holders need to invest in the whole child - which includes family units .. which equals communities."

"There is an extremely limited choice in childcare spots in Charlottetown for children between 12-22 months and it is very discouraging for those parents returning to work."

"Affordability is key! Most people will tend to opt for private home care for their preschool child as this is the only feasible option financially. Cleanliness is also another concern these days with many new illnesses and viruses. Establishments offering preschool programs and services need to maintain clean spaces, toys, etc. on a regular/daily basis."

"They should try to keep kids and preschoolers equal as possible by making it affordable for all parents to put kids in daycare and in sports programs."

"Make programs affordable, help with transportation and help with childcare.

Make programs fun, children learn by playing, have lots of parent and child interaction. Remember that our children should not be taken for granted, they are so very important."

"I feel that early childhood education should be universal. There should be funding for pre-school now that kindergarten is entering the mainstream of education. Educators should be well - compensated, even government paid."

"Provide them at a time when working parents can attend them (evenings/weekends)."

"That everything doesn't always have to be about money. It's bad enough that we get taxes taken off but to work for free just to pay childcare fees. Is it really worth it?"

"Not enough provincial money is budgeted or spent on childcare or childcare development in PEI. In this respect, there is not much value placed on our children."

"My advice would be to remember it's all about the children but it is also to be affordable and easy for parents to take their children to different programs or services. Sometimes transportation is an issue. Stay at home parents are usually

the ones that take part in these programs and they don't always have transportation."

"The Gov't should assist more financially so that any child can go to a regulated center with excellent programming."

"I am concerned about the cost of daycare in relation to wages. I often wonder how a single parent can afford to have one or more children in daycare, especially seasonal workers and those receiving minimum wage. The average cost of childcare is \$25 per day or \$500 per month. This is a significant amount for most people - the equivalent of rent or a mortgage payment. It would be great if childcare could be subsidized and / or included in the education system (pre-K), beyond the federal UCCB. I personally do not return to a \$10/hr job after maternity leave because by the time I paid for childcare and the gas to commute there would be hardly anything left from my earnings - certainly not enough to feed, clothe and house my child if I were single."

"Most parenting programs are offered during the day when most parents are at work. Smaller communities need more childcare options."

"More affordable childcare, better childcare services so parents are not stuck with the choice if not working or substandard childcare. More moveability and money with childcare subsidy program."

Participants reported that access to regulated childcare, when they needed it, was sometimes difficult. The specific access issues were the lack of childcare spaces depending on the age of the child, and/or the

Survey Participant

hours of operation of the program. According to the participants, to some extent, the availability of childcare was also dependent on the community where the participant lived, urban or rural. The cost of childcare was a concern for over 70% of participants. There was a general view that government needed to provide for more affordable childcare options. Respondents indicated this could be done by putting money directly into the early childhood sector and by increasing access for parents to the childcare subsidy program.

To this point I have reported on what participants stated was of importance, or of concern to them as parents. The final 2 questions will look at: (a) where parents go for support; and (b) identifying gaps in programs or services.

Research Question 4:

What types of support systems exist to assist parents in responding to these concerns?

In response to the question, "Where do you go for parenting support?", participants reported finding most of their support from family and friends (see Figure 16). After analysis, ($\chi^2(4)= 30.981^a$ $p < .000$), the results indicated parents earning over \$60K or under \$20K are more likely to turn to family or friends. Further analysis, ($\chi^2(4)= 9.646^a$ $p < .047$), indicated that earners between \$40 and \$60K are more likely to turn to an early childhood educator for parenting support.

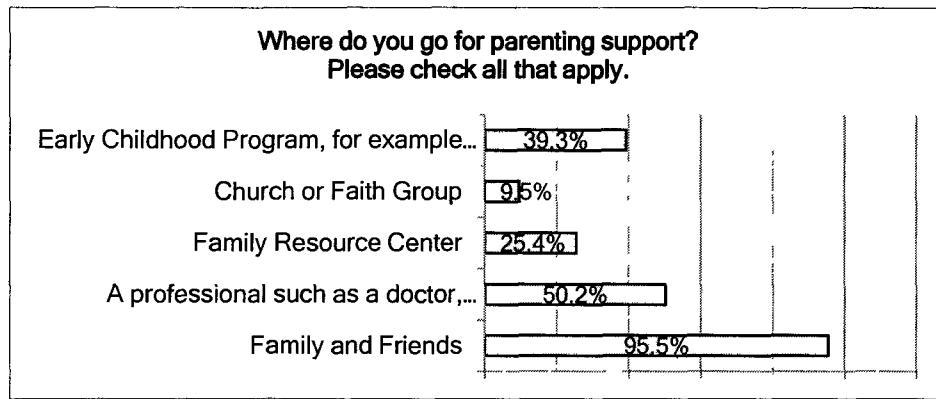


Figure 16. Parenting Support (201 responses).

While at work or school, the majority of parents (51.3%) reported utilising the regulated childcare sector. As well, a large number of parents depend on family, friends or the unregulated sector (see Figure 17) to assist with childcare. Depending on the time of year, and/or hours of operation of the regulated childcare programs, some parents utilized other forms of care such as a relative, private babysitter, or a partner was at home.

When asked about where they went for parenting support, the statistical analysis, indicated that parents over the age of 31 were not likely to utilise the services provided by Family Resource Centers compared to younger parents ($X^2(2)= 5.718^a$ $p< .017$).

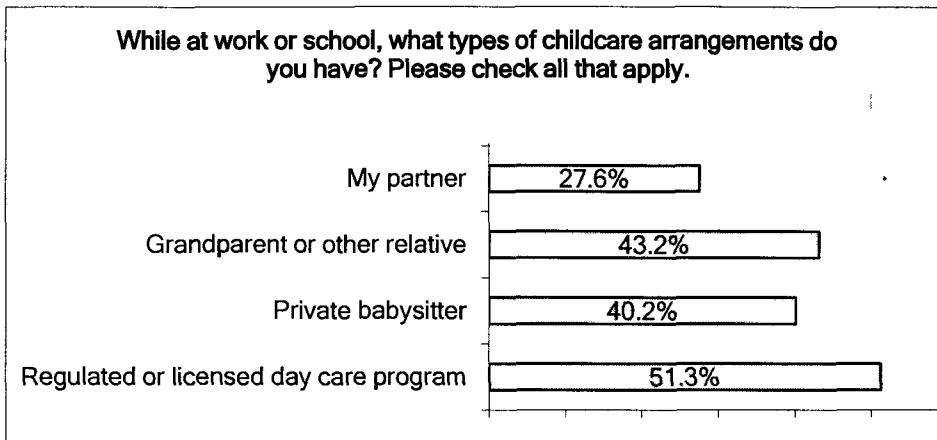


Figure 17. Childcare Arrangements (199 responses).

It is important to note that some participants reported using both the regulated and unregulated sector at various times. This appeared to be dependent on the age of the child, and whether the parents had seasonal or shift work. Access and affordability became a factor for some participants. The statistical analysis would indicate that participants who are married or living in a common-law relationship are less likely to identify they are at home ($\chi^2(1) = 6.684^a$ $p < .010$), when asked what types of childcare arrangements they have. This suggests married or common-law partners are utilizing some form of childcare.

When asked to consider the components of an effective childcare environment parents identified the indoor and outdoor spaces as being of top priority (see Figure 18). This reinforces the importance parents of young children place on play and learning.

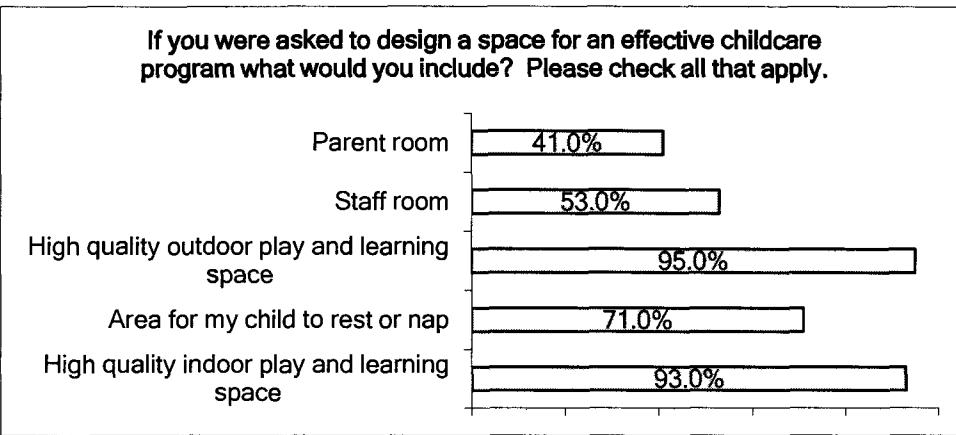


Figure 18. Effective Childcare Space (200 responses).

The overall survey results indicated that the learning environment (indoor and outdoor) was most important to participants. As well, 57% of parents with a university background, 26.8% with other post-secondary education, and 16.2% of parents with high school indicated a rest or nap area for their children was important, ($\chi^2(2)= 7.119^a$ $p< .028$). This suggests that parents with post-secondary experiences place a greater value on providing rest opportunities for their children.

When asked to highlight topics of interest or factors to consider when developing workshops for parents, the top priority was given to providing information to parents on discipline (see Figure 19). However, making time for parents to connect, and providing information on child development were also important.

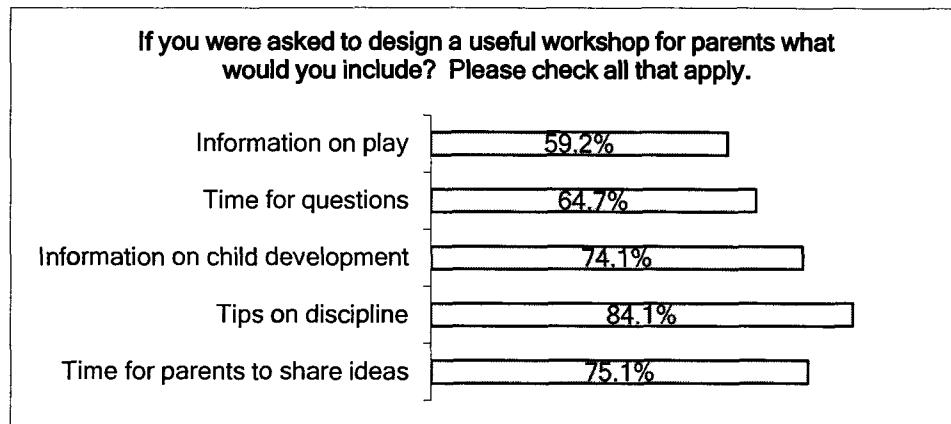


Figure 19. Workshop Topics (201 responses).

It was not surprising, given that participants identified family and friends as their strongest support, that they then identified living close to family and friends as the primary reason for choosing a community to live (see Figure 20).

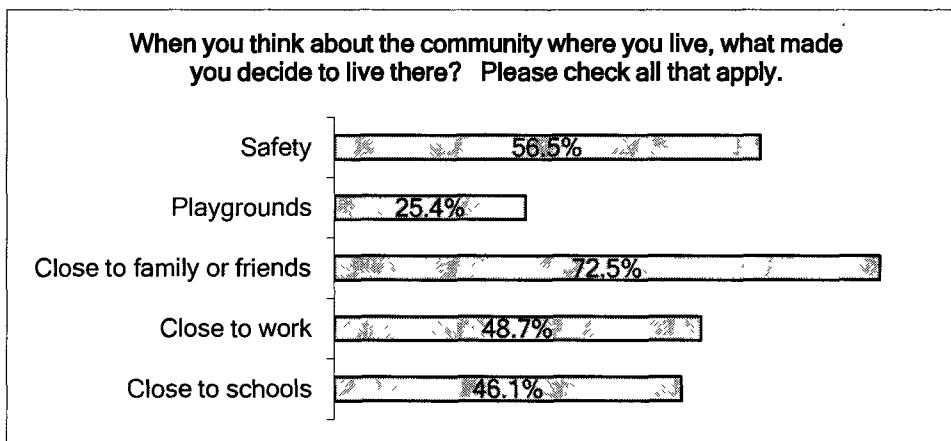


Figure 20. Choosing a Community (193 responses).

In summary, participants (a) turn first to family or friends when they need support as a parent; (b) live close to their family or friends; (c) utilize a variety of childcare arrangements; (d) are concerned with the indoor and outdoor learning environment for their children; (e) are interested in learning more about child development and discipline; and (f) would like an opportunity to come together as parents to share ideas.

Research Question 5:

What gaps do parents identify in the current programs/services provided?

In response to the question, "Are there services missing in your community?", respondents identified the lack of a library as the main support missing from the community (see Figure 21). The statistical analysis, ($X^2(1)= 4.723^a$ $p< .030$), would indicate that parents > 31 , however, are more likely to identify medical services, such as a doctor, pharmacy or clinic, as missing from their community, as compared to parents <31 .

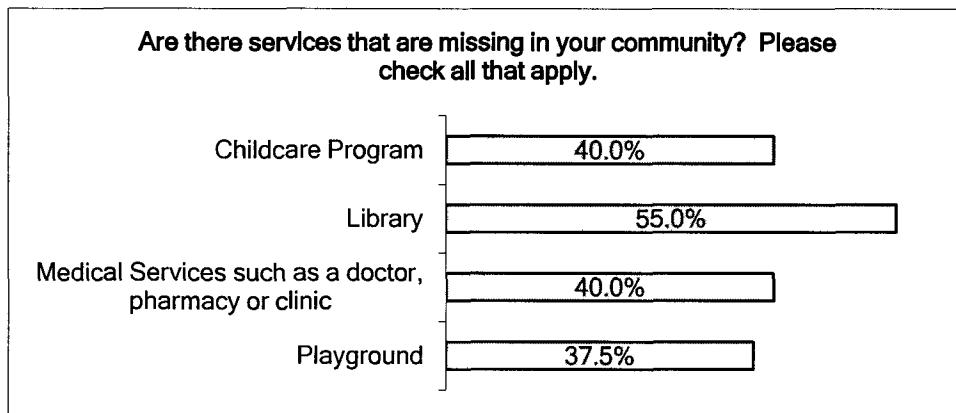


Figure 21. Services Missing from Community (80 responses).

When asked to identify what else was missing from the community, respondents listed activities for young children (such as art and music, or a museum), affordable childcare, bike paths, access to speech services, better bus routes and quality indoor activity centers. The data suggested that the more rural a community in which people live, the less access to services they might have.

When asked "Does your child attend a childcare program?", the majority of participants identified utilizing the regulated childcare sector (see Figure 22). The statistical analysis indicated that participants who are married or living in a common-law relationship are less likely to identify that a parent is at home, ($X^2(1)= 9.094^a$ $p< .003$),

when asked if their child attends a childcare program. However, participants also identified the lack of childcare for seasonal and shift work employees. They noted as well the shortage of infant spaces and posed a question about whether the province would be moving toward a publicly funded pre-kindergarten program.

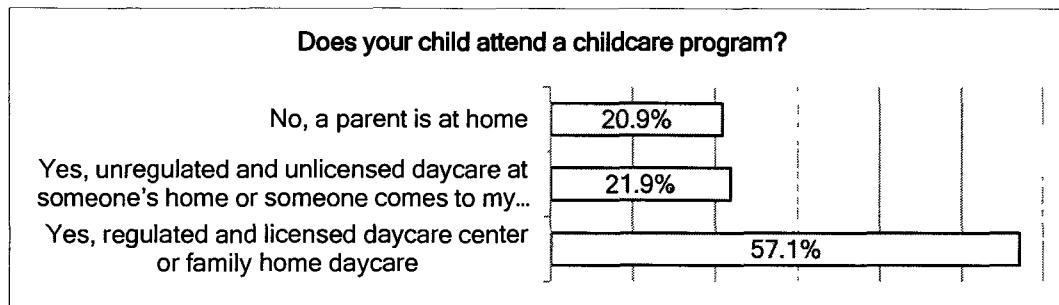


Figure 22. Uses Childcare (196 responses).

When selecting childcare for their children the majority of parents reported "a caring supportive person" was what made them feel welcome at their center (see Figure 23). Bronfenbrenner (2005) contends that every child must have a significant adult in their world who cares deeply for him/her. This underlines the linkage of the quality of the service and the contentment of the parents with staff relationships (Keyes, 2002).

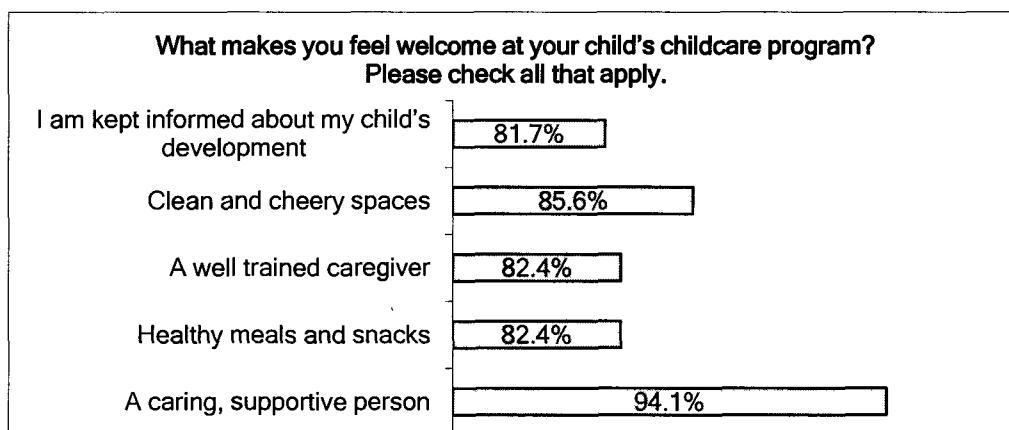


Figure 23. What Makes You Feel Welcome at Center (153 responses).

For those parents who indicated they used childcare, the statistical analysis indicated that parents with post-secondary education placed a priority over parents who

do not have post-secondary education in having a welcoming and caring person at the center ($X^2(2)= 14.942^a$ $p< .001$), trained staff, ($X^2(2)= 7.777^a$ $p< .020$), the quality of the meals and snacks served, ($X^2(2)= 8.337^a$ $p< .015$), a clean and cheery space, ($X^2(2)= 7.566^a$ $p< .023$), and on being kept informed on their child's progress ($X^2(2)= 12.941^a$ $p< .002$). When asked to consider the importance of healthy meals and snacks at the childcare program, the analysis, ($X^2(1)= 8.971^a$ $p< .003$), would indicate parents >31 are more likely to see this as important.

Research (McCain et al., 2007; OECD, 2006) would indicate the single most important factor to quality early childhood programming is the educator. It is interesting then that when asked to consider trained staff the statistical analysis, ($X^2(1)= 5.146^a$ $p< .023$), indicated that parents > 31 are more likely to identify trained staff as important.

Summary

In summary, parents identified the need for: (a) high quality accessible, affordable childcare staffed with highly skilled and caring staff; (b) effective communication with parents; (c) ongoing opportunity to provide input into decisions which affect them as parents or their children; and (d) programs and services which reflect current research and best practices. Although a minority of parents (11%) reported having children with special needs, those who did, identified reduced wait times resulting in access to professionals in a timely fashion were critical.

Participants wanted to learn more about relevant areas of child development including: (a) how their child learns; (b) how to help their child with cognitive skill development; (c) discipline techniques; and (d) healthy eating strategies. Participants tended to turn first to family and friends when they needed help as a parent and chose also to live close to their family and friends.

Through careful analysis of the data, review of the research, and by developing my skills as a researcher, I believe I have presented the findings in a credible and meaningful way. The final chapter of the thesis will review the research findings from this study with other data, discuss the implications of this study, and consider future research possibilities.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

Discussion

This study aims at sharing the voices of Prince Edward Island (PEI) parents of preschool children. I believe the findings of this research have merit for consideration in policy planning and future direction at the community, municipal and provincial levels. Parents want to be heard. They are asking to have their perspectives and desires known and that decision makers will then respond to their perspective in a meaningful way.

This study was not intended, in part or in whole, to be an evaluation of existing programs or services offered to PEI children and parents. Any review of a program or service requires a particular and rigorous approach to the evaluation.

What We Know

Overall Canadian families are feeling the increasing economic, social and personal pressures of everyday life (Barette, 2009). Families are under increased stress and require a variety of supports to meet these challenges. Willms (2002) identified that at any given time approximately 28% of our children are vulnerable or at risk for not achieving healthy outcomes. Vulnerability changes, for example a child may have a serious illness which causes him or her to be in hospital for extended stays over a period of time, and then gets well. The vulnerability, or risk for not achieving healthy outcomes may be removed once the illness is over. According to Willms (2002) vulnerability changes, implying that the children included in this percentage of 28% will also change.

Prince Edward Island children have continued to score well overall in the 5 domains: (a) physical health and well-being; (b) social competence; (c) emotional maturity; (d) language and cognitive development; and (e) communication and general knowledge, explored by the Early Development Instrument (EDI) and reported in the

Understanding the Early Years (UEY) Project (2001 & 2005). However, there are geographical pockets where improvements can be made. When comparing the data reported in UEY Project for 2001 and 2005, several themes emerged: (a) the population of children and young people was decreasing; (b) there appeared to be socio-economic risks such as a high unemployment rate and low education levels; (c) there appeared to be a high percentage of rural and seasonal work; (d) there were geographic areas of high risk, especially in downtown areas; (e) some Island families, especially those living in rural PEI, may have difficulty accessing resources; and (f) Island families reported the need for increased access to resources.

According to Willms (2002), the needs of children and families will change. In addition, we know too that approximately 86% of Island women with children under 6 years of age are in the workforce (UEY, 2001). Also, the Canadian Survey (Oldershaw,2002) found that parents are asking for more information and need additional support in relation to understanding early childhood development and parenting support. My research findings are consistent with the data reported in the Canadian Survey (Oldershaw,2002). Considering all of this, I suggest that programs and services need to reflect the changing needs of families and be prepared to respond where appropriate to meeting these needs. For example, should health needs change, so could the information or support parents require.

The PEI Status of Women (2003) made several recommendations in relation to early childhood education in PEI. Overall the recommendations highlighted the need to ensure the sector itself was visible in the eyes of government and parents. It was also believed that more funding was needed in the sector to enable childcare programs to provide more effective services to families such as infant care and extended hours. In

addition to accessibility it was highlighted that: (a) childcare needed to be more affordable and inclusive; (b) parents needed more options; and (c) early childhood programs needed to continue to enhance the quality of service provided to children and families. This could not be achieved however without improving the wages and working conditions of the early childhood educators themselves. I believe the recommendations made by the PEI Status of Women (2003) are very similar to the perspective of the participants in this study where participants also indicated the need for increased access and affordable childcare, various options for childcare such as infant care or extended hours and increased quality to programs and services.

The provincial government of Prince Edward Island introduced a Rural Action Plan in 2009 entitled *A Rural Economic Development Strategy for Prince Edward Island*. This action plan is an economic strategy aimed at improving the economic outcome for rural PEI. Three of the seven goals of the action plan have a direct impact on the children and families utilizing the early childhood education and care sector. The three goals of the action plan that impact directly on children are:

(1) to invest in community development efforts and to strengthen community-based capacities, (2) to invest in education and the development of human resources in order to create opportunities, strengthen the base of Island industries and to share-to the fullest extent possible- the benefits of the "One Island Community" principle and (3) to increase developments in areas of greatest need in order to stimulate growth and opportunity. (*Rural Action Plan*, 2009, pg.5)

PEI families migrate to Charlottetown and Summerside as part of their work commute. This strategy promises to address the needs of the families living and working in rural PEI. Building stronger more viable rural communities is what the plan is all

about. The three goals mentioned above link nicely with the findings of this study. The participants in my study were from a mix of urban and rural families. A focus on community capacity building, development, and growth will bring business to rural PEI and in turn possibly keep families living and working in their rural communities. Participants in this study stated that they chose the community where they lived to be close to family and friends. Participants were also concerned about the quality of the experiences their children would have in the programs and services they took part in and stressed the need for well trained professionals. In general the Rural Economic Strategy has the potential to have a positive impact for families of rural PEI by strengthening community capacity, developing growth opportunities and investing in education.

"Focus on quality and put the systems in place to ensure that quality is number one."

Survey Participant

From my perspective, a focus on education means a focus on early childhood education. Under the Rural Action Plan a commitment was made to provide input into the provincial early childhood strategy to ensure the needs of rural parents are addressed. My research found that parents want to provide input into the decisions, made by policy and program developers, which have an impact on them as parents or their children.

While it is necessary to understand the dynamics of families and to hear the voices of the parents, one factor not considered in the scope of this research was the voice of the children themselves. It is equally necessary to understand and listen to the children. "Aboriginal communities believe that healthy communities are ones in which children's voices are heard, not silenced. In the interest of the world's children, we must

listen to them and learn" (Schissel & Schissel, 2008, p.66). Simply listening to parents and children may not be enough though. We must also remember the rights of every child. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), children are entitled to additional rights: they need to be able to depend on adults to look after them, defend their rights and help them reach their potential. The Convention (1989) also states that a child has the right to play, a balanced diet, housing, education, health care, protection from abuse and neglect, the right to participate in their communities and have programs and services provided for them as children. Canada is outstanding with respect to human rights, but we fall short in upholding the rights of our children and youth, as outlined in this convention (Schissel & Schissel, 2008).

As we move forward in determining the future of early childhood education and care in PEI, it will be critical for us to find meaningful ways of listening to and capturing the voices of the children, in addition to the voices of their parents and caregivers.

What the Study Revealed

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to obtain a perspective from PEI parents of preschool children, regarding their views on what is important for them, and for their children, in terms of understanding healthy development and need for parental support; and (b) to use the information gathered to inform current policy and program development. Specifically I wanted to learn from parents: (a) whether they believed they had a meaningful voice in program or policy developments which impact children and families; (b) what concerns they might have in relation to child development, childcare, and early childhood education in general; and (c) whether they identified any gaps in

current services or programs. My research questions (below) were intended to address the overall purpose of the study.

- 1) How do parents understand the importance of the early years and use this knowledge in their child's early childhood experiences?
- 2) How do parents believe they can have a more meaningful and influential role in decisions affecting their children's well being?
- 3) What are the principal concerns of parents as their children grow from infancy to school entry?
- 4) What types of support systems exist to assist parents in responding to these concerns?
- 5) What gaps do parents identify in the current programs/services provided?

"Policy holders need to consult parents more - before making decisions about our kids. Need more working together in communities to help raise families."

Survey Participant

In summary, the research findings from this study identified the need for: (a) high quality accessible, affordable childcare staffed with highly skilled and caring staff; (b) effective communication with parents; (c) ongoing opportunities to provide input into decisions which affect them as parents or their children; (d) programs and services which reflect current research and best practices; (e) reduced wait times resulting in access to professionals in a timely fashion; and (f) information on child development, how children learn, discipline techniques and healthy eating strategies. Lastly, participants tended to turn first to family and friends when they needed help as a parent and chose also to live close to their family and friends.

I believe that the findings of this research provide some directions as programs, services and policies are developed or enhanced. I suggest that as initiatives take place decision makers must ensure: (a) interactive communication with families; (b)

accessibility and affordability for all families; (c) the maintenance of developmentally appropriate programs with a focus on play; (d) a well-trained and compensated early childhood sector; and (e) that programs and services are inclusive of all children and families regardless of their family values, ethnic backgrounds or religious beliefs.

Parents' Perspective

My research findings indicated that the majority of parents reported using some form of childcare and value time for their children to play on their own or with friends. Unlike the CCL Survey (2008), my study did not indicate that parents with a higher income are statistically more likely to use the regulated childcare sector. However, when asked about the use of regulated childcare, the statistical analysis from this study, ($\chi^2(2)=22.740^a$ $p<.000$), suggests that parents with a university background are more likely to also use the regulated early childhood sector.

Consistent with *Take 30 Benchmark Research* (2008) and the *PEI Early Childhood Parent Survey Report* (Flanagan, 2010), the data from this study suggests that affordable, accessible childcare is difficult to access, particularly for parents of infants or for those who engage in seasonal or shift work.

The relationships between parents and their child's caregiver are absolutely key in the success of the childcare arrangement (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Keyes, 2002; Sumsion, 1999; Zelman & Perlman, 2006). This study also found that the single most important component of their childcare arrangement for parents is a caring and supportive person.

In summary, parents are asking for high quality programs and services, provided in a timely and accessible fashion, by caring and supportive staff. Parents require

effective communication and opportunity to provide input into the development or review of programs, services or policies which affect children and families.

Implications of the Study

When considering the findings from this study there are implications for both decision makers and families. This next section will review the implications and provide program and policy suggestions.

Implications for Policy

The Prince Edward Island Preschool Excellence Initiative (2010) introduced by the provincial government as a result of the Flanagan Report (2010) makes great strides in responding to the themes identified in this study: (a) ensuring ongoing communication and parental input; (b) addressing the quality of programs and services offered; and (c) providing for accessible programs and services / affordable childcare. Specifically, the initiative will begin to address access, affordability and sustainability of the early childhood sector. For example, parents opting to register their child in an Early Years Center (EYC) will have capped parent fees. The fees for childcare in EYCs beginning in September 2010 will be set at the provincial mean. Parents of infants will pay \$32 dollars per day; the toddler fee is set at \$26 per day and preschoolers at \$25 per day. The provincial Childcare Subsidy Program (a financial assistance program aimed at supporting parents who are working or at school), will pay these rates for parents who are eligible for the program. In addition, the threshold of eligibility has been increased by \$2000. This increase is anticipated to have a positive impact for approximately 1000 Island families. Parents in the survey were clear that affordable childcare was a huge need. This policy direction begins to look at affordable childcare yet it must be carefully considered. Will these rates and policy change in the Childcare Subsidy Program have a

direct impact on the number of families accessing childcare? I believe ongoing monitoring and evaluation will be necessary to ensure access is truly achieved.

Owners of Early Years Centers (EYC) will have a unit funding model based on staff salaries and operational costs. For many this will mean an increase of government revenue from a maximum of \$15,660 (based on enrolment) to approximately \$90,000 (based on enrolment). Certified early childhood educators will receive a minimum of \$15 per hour which could increase to \$16.88 in EYCs (based on years of experience).

One of the criteria to become an EYC is that programs must accept children with special needs, children from diverse backgrounds and infants. The findings from this study also identified the need for accessible childcare based on the needs of the family and needs and age of the child.

Many participants of this study identified the need for infant, seasonal and shift-work care. Although only approximately 10-15% of participants in this study indicated an interest in a pre-school or junior kindergarten program for their 4 year old children, I suggest there will be an increase in the number of parents seeking this service. Based on provincial experience with the kindergarten program, the enrolment went from 85% of 5 year old children attending kindergarten to approximately 97% when it became a publicly-funded program in 2000 (Mella, 2009). This situation suggests that parents place importance on their children having experiences in early learning the year before they begin school.

Flanagan (2010) recommended the establishment of Early Years Advisory Committees across Prince Edward Island. These community-based committees are

"I believe there should be more funding for children to attend a daycare system before they go to school. Especially now that kindergarten will be in the school system."

Survey Participant

intended to support the development of early learning programs as a direct response to need. The needs of parents will be a major consideration for these committees as communities, parents and early childhood educators together respond to the early learning needs of their children.

Another point raised by participants of this study was the need for parks, recreation options, and playgrounds. Municipalities generally have responsibility for these within communities across PEI. It is my experience that municipal governments strive to respond to the taxpayers within their jurisdictions. I would suggest that municipal governments could incorporate the establishment of parent ad-hoc groups to support the councillor(s) and committee(s) responsible for programs and services for families and children. Where communities are smaller it may be possible for communities to combine their efforts and work together for the benefit of children and families.

How else can the voices of Island parents be a part of municipal or provincial planning and on-going development? I would suggest the creation of a Provincial Association of Parents of Pre-School Children (PAPPC) modeled after the Provincial Home and School Federation. While the mandate of the Home and School Federation is to promote the well-being of school-aged children and the highest standards of education for each child, the proposed PAPPC would promote the overall well-being of all children from conception to school entry focusing on the child in relation to his/her family and community. This group would then be the starting point when addressing the perspective of families of preschool children.

A provincial Child and Youth Services Commissioner has been appointed to a two-year term of office. This provides opportunity for the provincial government to identify the gaps in services and programs, build on existing strengths, and ensure the voices of parents, in this case pre-school parents, are heard across government departments. I would suggest the commissioner use the findings from this study and other relevant studies as outlined in this research in establishing a meaningful role for pre-school parents when identifying any gaps in service or future policy development.

Implications for Programs and Services

As programs and services continue to respond to child, parent and community needs it is increasingly important that specific and deliberate attention be given to the voices of PEI families. Generally participants of this study

spoke well about the programs and services across PEI; however, they did challenge decision makers to be responsive to current and emerging trends and needs of family life.

As programs and services are developed or enhanced, I would suggest careful attention also be given to how and where parents access information. My research findings showed that parents are often unsure where to turn when looking for information. Parents identified the main areas where information would be helpful: child growth and development, how children learn, discipline, and helping their children develop early literacy and numeracy skills. I would recommend the development and

"I am really happy this research is being done in this area...there are so many programs for children who are older than 5 but not as many for younger children. More support groups for parents of newborns would be so beneficial. I know I felt quite isolated when my first child was born. Thank you for doing this research."

Survey Participant

maintenance of key access points for the disbursement of parent information. For example, parent information could be housed within the government web services, and capacity could also be developed within the proposed Provincial Association of Parents of Pre-School Children. In addition the Early Childhood Development Association of PEI , La Fédération des parents de lÎ.-P.-É. and the Family Resource Center Association could unite efforts relating to providing information to parents. Special attention must be given to the literacy levels of PEI parents and their access to technology when disseminating information.

Participants identified that they find it difficult to balance the demands of work and raising a young family. I would recommend that provincial and municipal governments establish meaningful family-friendly policies which accommodate this need to achieve a healthy work-life balance. Governments can lead by example and begin to set family-friendly policies for their employees which may be modeled or adopted by the private sector. Such policies could consider shared work assignments, adjusted hours to reflect childcare needs, on-site childcare, and family leave for the purpose of attending preschool activities such as concerts.

Impact for Parents and Children

Supporting the healthy development of children and families lies with all of us. As Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) *circle of influence* indicates, the child is directly impacted by the experiences he/she has in his/her family, at preschool, with his/her peer group, and within his/her community. I believe we have a moral obligation to provide the best possible experiences for our children so that they may grow and prosper as our future citizens.

My study suggests that Prince Edward Island parents want their views heard and understood. In addition, participants in the study were clear in wanting to be meaningfully engaged in policy and program development and their perspectives sought and understood. Although much is happening in the area of early learning and supporting children and families in PEI, I suggest this is an area requiring significant attention overall. I would encourage the inclusion of the parents' voices in any future development of programs, services and public policy in PEI.

Future Research

The primary aim of the study was to uncover what parents of Prince Edward Island preschool children understand about early childhood and how they in turn use this knowledge to make decisions for their children. In addition I sought to understand whether what parents require to support them as parents is available. I believe I was successful in achieving this; however, I also believe that additional research in this area is needed.

Parents identified gaps in programs and services and in finding the types of services they require in a timely manner. Further provincial research is needed to understand the gaps identified and the possible barriers to overcoming these.

With the introduction of the PEI Preschool Excellence Initiative and previously developed programs and services for children and families, considerable financial investments are being made on behalf of children and families. Provincially-based research is needed to look at the various types of investments made and whether they are making a difference for children and families. I suggest that an inventory of provincial

"This was a very worthwhile survey to take part in and hopefully will offer a few suggestions for future development within the Early Childhood Field."

Survey Participant

programs and services is needed. Once completed I recommend an evaluation framework be established looking at the desired outcomes of each program or service identified, with an expectation of either improving the outcomes or abolishing the program or services should it not be meeting the desired outcome.

Further research could also be completed exploring the work-life balance of Prince Edward Island families that would inform future family-friendly workplace policies.

Because of participant interest from this study in a pre-kindergarten program and the provincial commitment for: (a) increased access to infant spaces; (b) regulated fees; (c) extended hours; and (d) seasonal care, it will be interesting to watch the growth patterns of children registering in early learning and childcare programs over the next few years. Further research in this area would be meaningful to inform program and policy development.

Finally, the participants of this study were mainly female, married, had post-secondary education and had a combined income level over \$60,000 annually. Further research understanding the needs of fathers, single or lone parents, parents without a post-secondary education or earning under \$60,000 would be necessary to capture another perspective from parents of pre-school children in PEI.

Final Thoughts

Based on the responses of participants from the "*Do You Hear What I Say? Attending to the Voices of Prince Edward Island Families*" study, it could be concluded that PEI families would support the policy recommendations of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009), The Council for Early Childhood Development (McCain et al., 2007, p.153) the PEI Status of Women Report (2003), and

The Early Years Report; Early Learning in PEI: An Investment in the Island's Future (Flanagan, 2010). It is essential that as program and policy developers move forward in Prince Edward Island they must ensure that parents continue to have a meaningful opportunity to provide input into the future development of policies, programs and services for children from birth to school entry.

In summary, I believe I have achieved what I set out to do with this study. I have developed my research skills, contributed new research and provided data and information which could be useful to individuals and agencies interested in the healthy development of our children and families. I have captured the voices of many Prince Edward Island parents... now ... we must listen.

Government cannot, and must not, do it all.

It truly does take an entire village to raise a child.

African Proverb

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Appendices

Appendix A: Parent / Guardian Survey

Important note: Each parent / guardian of the preschool child or children should fill out all parts of the survey.

Part A

Please Print

What language is spoken at your home? _____

What is your Postal Code? _____

How many years have you lived in the community? _____

What kind of community is it? (circle one): town country

How many people live with you? _____

How many children that are 5 years or under? _____

Please Circle Your Choice

Are you: male female

How old are you?:

under 21 years 22-30 years 31-40 years over 40 years

What is your Marital Status?

Single married separated common-law divorced widowed

What Education Level did you Complete?

high school trade school university college private training school

What is your Employment Status?

stay-at-home parent employed self-employed unemployed retired

Please Circle Your Choice

Do you work?

full-time part-time seasonal

Is your work shift-work?

yes no

What is your Occupation?

stay-at-home parent professional retail trade other

What is your job title?

(example: electrician) _____

What is your Total Household Income?

under \$20,000 \$20,000 - \$40,000 \$40,000 - \$60,000 over \$60,000

Part B

**Please complete this part for all your children aged 5 years and under.
Please circle or fill in the blanks:**

First Child

Sex of child: male female

Birth date: month _____ year _____

Does your child have any developmental or health concerns?

none allergies intellectual challenge illness physical challenge

other: _____

Does your child require any special services or supports to meet his or her needs?

none speech language pathologist occupational therapist

doctor special needs assistant physiotherapist

other: _____

Second Child

Sex of child: male female

Birth date: month _____ year _____

Does your child have any developmental or health concerns?

none allergies intellectual challenge illness physical challenge

other: _____

Does your child require any special services or supports to meet his or her needs?

none speech language pathologist occupational therapist

doctor special needs assistant physiotherapist

other: _____

Please use more pages if you need them.

Part C

Example: Please rank each of the following activities from 1 to 5 in order of fun for you, where 1 is least fun and 5 is the most fun.

1	Camping
4	Going to the beach
2	Going to summer camp
5	Family picnics
3	Visiting family and friends

Please rank each of the following activities from 1 to 5 in order of importance for you where 1 is least important and 5 is the most important.

	Dealing with a fussy eater
	Limiting TV or videos
	Having effective discipline techniques
	Selecting toys and books
	Knowing where to find information or help

Please rank each of the following activities from 1 to 5 in order of importance for you where 1 is least important and 5 is the most important.

	Helping my child learn letters, numbers, colors
	Understanding more about how my child learns
	Understanding more about how my child will grow
	Making healthy eating choices for my child
	Training my child to go to the bathroom

Please rank each of the following activities from 1 to 5 in order of importance for you where 1 is least important and 5 is the most important.

	Spending time with grandparents or extended family like aunts or cousins
	Celebrating special events like birthdays
	Eating family meals together
	Having regular family outings
	Talking together or hanging out

Please rank each of the following activities from 1 to 5 in order of importance for you where 1 is least important and 5 is the most important.

	My child has unstructured or free play for at least 30 minutes every day
	My child and I have time to play together every day
	My child has time to play alone every day
	My child has time to play outdoors every day if the weather permits
	My child has regular time to play with friends

Part D

Where do you go for parenting support?
Please check all that apply. ✓

- Family and Friends
- A professional such as a doctor, lawyer or public health nurse
- Family Resource Center
- Church or Faith Group
- Early Childhood Program, for example a daycare

While at work or school, what types of childcare arrangements do you have?
Please check all that apply. ✓

- Regulated or licensed day care program
- Private babysitter
- Grandparent or other relative
- My partner
- I'm at home

If you were asked to design a useful workshop for parents what would you include?
Please check all that apply. ✓

- Time for parents to share ideas
- Tips on discipline
- Information on child development
- Time for questions
- Information on play

If you were asked to design a space for an effective childcare program what would you include? Please check all that apply. ✓

- High quality indoor play and learning space
- Area for my child to rest or nap
- High quality outdoor play and learning space
- Staff room
- Parent room

When you think about the community where you live, what made you decide to live there?
Please check all that apply. ✓

- Close to schools
- Close to work
- Close to family or friends
- Playgrounds
- Safety

**Are there services that are missing in your community?
Please check all that apply. ✓**

Playground
 Medical Services such as a doctor, pharmacy or clinic
 Library
 Childcare Program
 Other (please specify) _____

Does your child attend a childcare program?

Yes, regulated and licensed daycare center or family home daycare
 Yes, unregulated and unlicensed daycare at someone's home or someone comes to my home
 No, a parent is at home

If you answered, "yes" to the last question please answer the next question.

**What makes you feel welcome at your child's childcare program?
Please check all that apply. ✓**

A caring, supportive person
 Healthy meals and snacks
 A well trained caregiver
 Clean and cheery spaces
 I am kept informed about my child's development

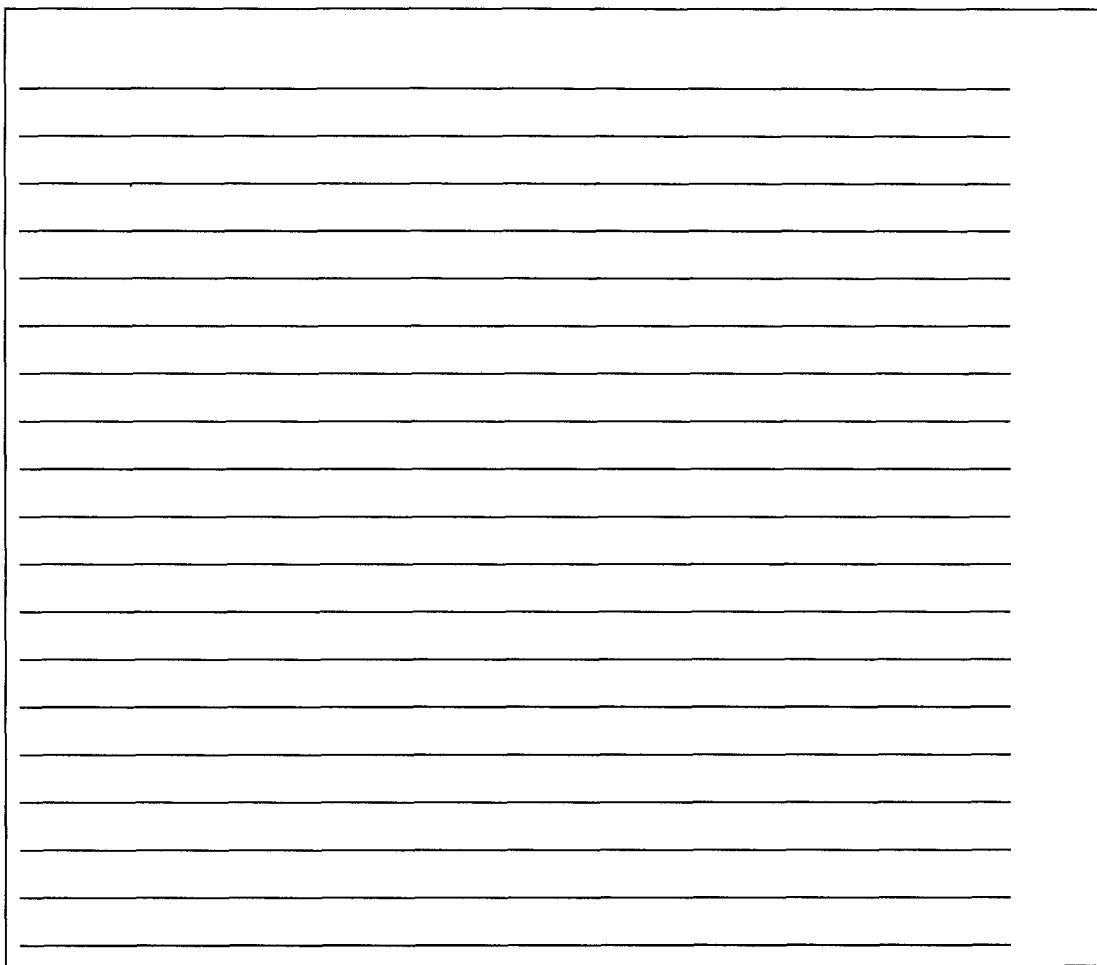
Part E

What is your advice to people who develop policies, programs or services for children and families?

Please respond to the following statement:

In Prince Edward Island, we value our children.

Do you have any additional comments?



A large rectangular box containing 20 horizontal lines for writing additional comments.

Please use more pages if you need them.

Thank you for taking time to answer these questions and to share your thoughts and ideas.

Appendix B: Information Letter to Program / Service Providers

Insert Name and Address of Program/ Service

April 14, 2009

Dear (Insert Name),

I am writing to you as a student in the Masters of Education in Leadership in Learning Program at the University of Prince Edward Island. As a component of my degree requirements I am completing a research project or thesis.

In my study I will be seeking input from parents of preschool children from across PEI, regarding what is important to them in relation to their parenting. I am asking your support by providing the enclosed survey to the parents within your program or service.

The parents in turn are being asked to complete the survey and return it to me in a self-addressed envelope. Should they prefer, the survey will also be available on-line at www.surveymonkey.com/peiparents from July 2 to September 25, 2009.

Taking part in the survey is completely voluntary. The survey is anonymous and answers will remain confidential. In my final report I will talk about the findings of the survey questions in broad terms. Research findings may be used by programs, communities or governments to inform future program or service development.

Should you have any questions regarding this survey please do not hesitate to contact me at 902 569-7526 (work), [REDACTED] or by email at cesimpson@edu.pe.ca

Please contact the UPEI Research Review Board at 902-566-0637 or by e-mail at lmacphee@upei.ca if you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this study.

Thank you in advance for assisting with the study.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Simpson
MEd Student
University of Prince Edward Island

Appendix C: Parent / Guardian Information Letter

June 2, 2009

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Carolyn Simpson and I am a Masters student in the Leadership in Learning Program in the Faculty of Education at UPEI. As part of my degree requirements I must complete a research project or thesis. My project is called "Do You Hear What I Say: The Voice of Island Families". I have been involved in early childhood education for over 27 years and I am currently employed with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as the Manager of Early Childhood Development and Kindergarten Programs. Although I work with the Department I am asking parents to take part in my project as a student at the university.

I am seeking information from about 400 parents or guardians of preschool children from across PEI. I want to learn more about what is important to you. By completing the enclosed survey you would be helping me in my research. What I learn may help with planning for programs or services for children in the future. My questions are about everyday concerns of parents as they try to provide the best for their children.

If you are interested in taking part, please complete the survey and return it in the self addressed and stamped envelope provided. If you prefer, you can do the survey on-line at www.surveymonkey.com/peiparents.

If you have friends or family interested in taking part on-line, the parent information letter and survey will be posted from July 2 to September 25, 2009. The survey will take about 12 to 15 minutes to complete.

Taking part in the survey is completely voluntary. The survey is anonymous and your answers will remain confidential. Other than myself and my research project advisors from the university, no one else will see the surveys.

In my final report I will talk about the findings of the survey questions in broad terms. That is, I will only discuss the questions in general and will not make reference to any one survey. Once I have completed my study my final report or thesis will be available on-line at UPEI. This will be available after I have finished my degree in May 2010.

Please contact either of my project advisors at the Faculty of Education, Dr. Ray Doiron or Dr. Martha Gabriel, if you have any questions about the project. Dr. Doiron may be reached at 902-566-0694 or by e-mail at raydoiron@upei.ca and Dr. Gabriel may be reached at 902-566-0503 or by e-mail at mgabriel@upei.ca.

Please contact the UPEI Research Review Board at 902-566-0637 or by e-mail at lmacphee@upei.ca if you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this study.

If you have any questions please contact me at 902-569-7526 (work), [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] or by e-mail at cesimpson@edu.pe.ca.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Simpson
MEd Student
University of Prince Edward Island

Appendix D: Statistical Differences According to Demographic Variables

Survey Question	Gender	Education	Age	Income	Marital Status
Dealing with a fussy eater					
Limiting TV or videos					
Having effective discipline techniques					
Selecting toys and books					
Knowing where to find information or help				$\chi^2(16) = 29.124^a$ $p < .023$	
Helping my child learn letters, numbers, colors					
Understanding more about how my child learns					
Understanding more about how my child will grow					
Making healthy eating choices for my child					
Training my child to go to the bathroom					
Spending time with grandparents or extended family like aunts or cousins					
Celebrating special events like birthdays					

Survey Question	Gender	Education	Age	Income	Marital Status
Eating family meals together					
Having regular family outings	$\chi^2(4)=$ 10.377 ^a p< .035				
My child and I have time to play together every day					
My child has time to play alone every day					
My child has time to play outdoors every day if the weather permits					
My child has regular time to play with friends					
Family and Friends				$\chi^2(4)=$ 30.981 ^a p< .000	
Family Resource Center			$\chi^2(2)=$ 5.718 ^a p< .017		
Church or Faith Group					
Early Childhood Program, for example a daycare				$\chi^2(4)=$ 9.646 ^a p< .047	
Regulated or licensed day care program					
Private babysitter					
Grandparent or other relative					

Survey Question	Gender	Education	Age	Income	Marital Status
My partner					
I'm at home					$\chi^2(1)= 6.684^a$ $p< .010$
Time for parents to share ideas			$\chi^2(1)=$ 3.997 ^a $p<$.046		
Tips on discipline				$\chi^2(4)=$ 11.811 ^a $p<$.019	
Time for questions					
Information on play		$\chi^2(2)= 6.061^a$ $p< .048$			
Area for my child to rest or nap		$\chi^2(2)= 7.119^a$ $p< .028$			
High quality outdoor play and learning space					
Staff room		$\chi^2(2)= 9.315^a$ $p< .009$			
Parent room			$\chi^2(1)=$ 6.434 ^a $p<$.011	$\chi^2(4)=$ 12.090 ^a $p<$.017	
Close to schools				$\chi^2(4)=$ 10.210 ^a $p<$.037	
Close to work					
Close to family or friends				$\chi^2(4)= 9.280^a$ $p< .054$	
Playgrounds		$\chi^2(2)= 7.626^a$ $p< .022$			

Survey Question	Gender	Education	Age	Income	Marital Status
Playground					
Medical Services such as a doctor, pharmacy or clinic			$\chi^2(1)= 4.723^a$ p< .030	$\chi^2(4)= 9.428^a$ p< .051	
Library					
Childcare Program					
Yes, regulated and licensed daycare center or family home daycare		$\chi^2(2)= 22.740^a$ p< .000			
No, a parent is at home		$\chi^2(2)= 20.959^a$ p< .000			$\chi^2(1)= 9.094^a$ p< .003
A caring, supportive person		$\chi^2(2)= 14.942^a$ p< .001	$\chi^2(1)= 12.476^a$ p< .000	$\chi^2(4)= 13.040^a$ p< .011	
Healthy meals and snacks		$\chi^2(2)= 8.337^a$ p< .015	$\chi^2(1)= 8.971^a$ p< .003		
A well trained caregiver		$\chi^2(2)= 7.777^a$ p< .020	$\chi^2(1)= 5.146^a$ p< .023		
Clean and cheery spaces		$\chi^2(2)= 7.566^a$ p< .023	$\chi^2(1)= 7.234^a$ p< .007		
I am kept informed about my child's development		$\chi^2(2)= 12.941^a$ p< .002			