



VOICES FROM THE FIELD - A Prevention Project For Low-Income Families

**Leslie McDiarmid, Project Coordinator
Better Beginnings, Better Futures**

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Service perspective

“Frontline workers often use current empirical research as guidelines to make decisions when developing new programs or refining existing ones,” says Leslie McDiarmid, Project Coordinator of Better Beginnings, Better Futures in Ottawa, Ontario.

Better Beginnings, Better Futures is a community-based primary prevention research initiative for young children (from birth to age five) and their families living in disadvantaged communities in Ontario. McDiarmid works with young children and their parents in specific Ottawa neighbourhoods where children are at risk for developmental problems. The CEECD papers on low income relate to some situations that McDiarmid sees in her work.¹⁻⁶

What are the implications of the research findings in the CEECD papers for your work?

Most research is done in a specific context. Better Beginnings, Better Futures uses research information and applies research findings that are relevant to their settings. For instance, about a year ago, Better Beginnings, Better Futures introduced Books for Babes, a new program for children in their community based on research indicating that young children living in low-income neighbourhoods demonstrate a serious lack of expressive language but do extremely well in receptive language. In comparison, research generally indicates that children who regularly attend daycare have more opportunities for language development. The goal of Books for Babes is to help improve children's expressive language and, to a lesser extent, their receptive language. In order to ensure that these young children have regular and consistent exposure to language skills (something that daycare settings provide), the staff works with the children's parents, using books as a tool for encouraging reading, telling or making up stories, playing games, etc. “It is vital to model engagement,” McDiarmid states. Parents need to interact more frequently with their children and give them the time and space to respond back and to develop and improve their language skills. In keeping with a community-based approach, the Books for Babes initiative is delivered in numerous settings, including homes and community indoor and outdoor settings.

The CEECD papers provide information that will assist Better Beginnings, Better Futures in evaluating what they already do and in planning, developing and implementing future programs to help disadvantaged families and their young children.¹⁻⁶ The key elements that these papers address are access, exposure, specific program elements and the concepts of holistic models. McDiarmid believes that the CEECD papers will generally inform her and her colleagues in these areas, although they lack specific details on the concepts presented.¹⁻⁶ McDiarmid feels that the CEECD information will encourage Better Beginnings, Better Futures staff to look at other related papers (e.g. home visiting, parental support) to get a more complete picture of programs and services that can be offered.¹⁻⁶

In particular, the CEECD papers indicate that some home visits never happen.¹⁻⁶ Better Beginnings, Better Futures has been able to provide about 80% of their scheduled visits. McDiarmid would like further information on the recommended frequency of visits to low-income families for maximum effect.

The CEECD papers also mention a number of studies indicating that home visiting by a nurse is more effective than lay home visits.¹⁻⁶ Although they have a nurse on staff, Better Beginnings, Better Futures is a lay home visiting program. This made McDiarmid wonder what specific elements in nurse home visiting make a difference: Is it the credential of the home visitor or specific elements of the program?

After reading the CEECD papers, McDiarmid is reassured that the Better Beginnings, Better Futures prevention project is on the right track, having addressed the issues of access, quality, community involvement and a holistic, flexible approach to program development and implementation in low-income communities.¹⁻⁶

Where are the main gaps between research, practice and policy and how might they be overcome?

Reading the CEECD papers reminds us how important it is to recognize that “*there is strength within these families and within these children*” and although research is generally deficit-based, it is very important to determine the strengths of these disadvantaged families – where they excel and why.¹⁻⁶ Day-to-day programming is quite removed from longitudinal research. Some parents regularly wonder why the researchers never ask anything good about their children and why all the tools used only measure the negative. “*How [much better] could we inform programs and policies if we understood the strengths as opposed to only the deficits?*” McDiarmid thinks the strength-based/capacity approach would be helpful in the long run, but she has yet to see a shift there. In the meantime, Better Beginnings, Better Futures focuses on family strengths when they prepare their programs.

Another aspect that should be considered is the very culturally diverse community within high-risk neighbourhoods. There appears to be little research on programming in very diverse communities. Research should be focusing not only one culture but rather on diversity within a community, so that service-providers can better understand the impact

of diversity and the kind of programming that would better serve these diverse communities.

Most of the research mentioned in the CEECD papers seems to focus on specific programs and specific outcomes.¹⁻⁶ McDiarmid would like to gain a fuller understanding of holistic programming with many different goals and a continuum of services.

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