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THE BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES PROJECT

In late 1988, a Technical Advisory Group of Ontario researchers and program directors recommended to the Ontario Government what has become the Better Beginnings, Better Futures project for preventing serious emotional and behavioural problems and fostering optimal social, cognitive and physical development in young children living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The government’s goal with this project was to launch a 25-year longitudinal prevention policy research demonstration project to provide information on the effectiveness of prevention as a policy for children.

The major goals of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures project were:
- to reduce the incidence of serious long-term emotional and behavioural problems in children;
- to promote social, emotional, behavioural, physical, and educational development in children; and
- to strengthen the ability of disadvantaged communities to respond effectively to the social and economic needs of children and their families.

The purpose of the project, as recommended by the experts, was not too discover the most efficient or leanest set of prevention services, but to determine just how effective a reasonably-financed and community-supported program could be, consisting of all promising components that could be launched within the budget constraints and with the support of the community.

Five neighbourhood sites were selected, by competition, to implement programs with children from birth to four years of age (Guelph, Kingston, South-East Ottawa, Inner City Toronto, and the Walpole Island First Nation); these are referred to as the younger child sites. Three sites were chosen to implement programs for children aged 4 to 8 (Cornwall, Highfield, and Sudbury); these are referred to as the older child sites. These eight sites were chosen, in part, because of socio-economic disadvantage. However, all children in the programs’ age range and their families living in the geographically defined project neighbourhoods were considered as potential project participants regardless of the socio-economic characteristics or structure of the family. Thus, the Better Beginnings project is a universal intervention implemented in high-risk neighbourhoods.

Each Better Beginnings site was expected to: (a) develop high-quality prevention programs reflecting local needs for healthy child development in disadvantaged neighbourhoods; (b) blend and unite local services for children and families; and (c) involve families and community leaders in all aspects of project development and implementation.

The Better Beginnings, Better Futures project was based on a community-based model, which means that a great deal of decision-making concerning operating structures, programs and budget allocation was made at the local level. The project was not a typical “top down”, tightly controlled set of prescribed interventions. Rather, it was a “bottom-up” community-driven
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initiative, with a wide variety of program activities designed to meet perceived local needs, where each site was encouraged to develop programs that would best meet local needs, within a basic framework, creating a different mix of programs in each site.

Programs at the Older Child Sites

This report focuses on the findings from the three older child sites, Cornwall, Highfield, and Sudbury, which created programs for children aged 4 to 8 years old and their families. Each of these sites was required to enhance local child care programs and provide some in-school programs, and then supplement these with other prevention programs specifically designed for its particular needs, such as before and after school programs, home visiting, parent groups, clothing exchanges, and toy-lending libraries.

The Cornwall Better Beginnings site consisted of four Francophone schools, scattered throughout the city. School-based programs accounted for more than half of its annual budget. Each school had a full-time “animator” who helped teachers provide language, cultural and other educational activities for children from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 2. The activities were designed to improve children’s thinking and learning skills, promote social skills and reduce behavioural problems, and build French language skills and cultural identity. The animators spent one-half to one full day in each classroom per week. All children in the class were involved, although additional time was spent with children who, in the view of the animator, required more attention. There was also a breakfast program, a welcome to school program, family visiting, a toy library and a summer family vacation camp. It also had a number of initiatives aimed at promoting French language and culture, increasing awareness of child development issues and partnership with local agencies.

The Highfield Better Beginnings site focused on one junior school with a very high concentration of recent immigrants. Over 40 languages were spoken in the homes of the children involved. With this “school-as-a-hub” model, the project provided a variety of family support and community development programs for all children in the age range, such as the Lions’ Quest social skills program, a breakfast and hot lunch program, a toy lending library and activities for children outside school hours and during holidays. But this program was unique in focusing half its resources on the one cohort of children designated to be followed for the longitudinal research. This group of children received classroom assistants who provided individual and group support to these children continuously from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 2. They lowered the adult-to-student ratio in the classroom to about 1:10, and provided assistance with language, self-help and social skills. They also provided summer enrichment activities, and eventually assumed a role of home visitor to families of these children.

The Sudbury Better Beginnings site consisted of two downtown neighbourhoods. There were three Anglophone schools and one Francophone school serving this area. This project did not originate within the school system. Rather it came together under the auspices of the Native Friendship Centre and devoted a comparatively modest percentage of program resources to in-school programs. A large part of the budget was spent on before- and after-school and holiday programs, such as before school breakfast and activities, after-school snacks, crafts, games and reading activities, and summer recreation programs. Other programs included a Native cultural
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program, a peaceful playground program, a family visiting and support program, as well as community kitchens and gardens.

To summarize, child-focused programs were carried out before, during or after school, and during holiday periods in each of the three older child project sites. Although the array of child programs differed across the three sites, all operated group programs that emphasized social skills and positive social interaction with peers and adults, problem-solving and learning experiences, and recreation programs. In Highfield, a teacher-run social skills program was also offered for all primary school children. All Better Beginnings sites offered breakfast programs, toy-lending programs and crafts programs. Home visiting by Better Beginnings staff was offered in all three sites, to provide emotional and social support to parents as well as information concerning child development and community resources. Each site also offered parent programs that provided opportunities for discussions of parenting problems, improving parent skills, and socializing and planning family activities; these parent programs were very flexible in terms of not having a structured curriculum or fixed number of sessions. An array of family/neighbourhood-focused programs were offered in each site and included active community outreach, social activities, environmental programs, economic development initiatives, and cultural celebrations.

Program Cost

As a model of primary prevention, the intent of Better Beginnings programs was to be available to and potentially accessed by all children in their respective catchment areas. Each Better Beginnings site received an annual budget allocation based on the number of children aged 4 to 8 in the project neighbourhood and a broad assessment of other funds present in the community. By dividing the allocations by the number of children, an average annual Better Beginnings program cost per child was calculated to be $1,130.

RESEARCH

A consortium of researchers from Queen's University, the University of Guelph, and Wilfrid Laurier University was selected by competition to form the Better Beginnings, Better Futures Research Coordination Unit (RCU) in 1990. Researchers from Laurentian University, the University of Ottawa, Ryerson University, and the University of Windsor were added to form the Core Research Team of the RCU. Local researchers were employed and trained by the RCU to collect data in each site.

Research Design and Data Collection for the Demonstration Phase in the Older Child Sites

Research on the Demonstration Phase (1991-1998) of the Better Beginnings project (i.e., the short-term research) was designed to address several major objectives. As listed in the Research Request for Proposals (Ontario Government, 1990) these objectives were:

- to determine how effective a reasonably financed and community-supported project can be;
- to investigate the costs of the Better Beginnings project; and
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• to investigate process and organizational issues associated with the development and implementation of the project in each site.

Due to the government’s competitive process for selecting project sites, and the intention to serve all children at a site, it was not possible to employ a randomized controlled trial design. Therefore, two major quasi-experimental designs were employed: (1) a leading baseline design and (2) a comparison site or non-random control group design.

Baseline measures on children, families and neighbourhoods were collected in 1992-93 before the local programs were fully operational. These baseline measures were collected on 206 eight-year-old children in the three older child Better Beginnings sites. These children were compared to others of the same age in the same neighbourhood after four years of Better Beginnings programming had been provided.

In 1993-94, a “focal” longitudinal research group of children and their families was recruited in the three older child Better Beginnings sites and in two comparison neighbourhoods, in Etobicoke and Ottawa-Vanier, where there was no Better Beginnings funding. Children who began Junior Kindergarten (JK) in 1993 constitute the focal longitudinal research group, and data were collected on this group of 700 children at ages, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 between 1993/4 and 1997/8.

SUMMARY OF KEY SHORT-TERM FINDINGS IN THE OLDER CHILD SITES (1993 TO 1998)

The major short-term findings at the end of the Project Demonstration Phase in 1998, when the project children reached eight years of age, are summarized below:

• Children showed improved social and emotional functioning – particularly decreased emotional-anxiety problems and improved social skills as rated by their teachers. These improvements were greater in Cornwall and Highfield than in Sudbury.

• There were no consistent patterns of improvement in direct measures of children’s cognitive development or academic achievement relative to comparison children. There were, however, significant decreases in the percentage of special education students in the Cornwall and Highfield project site schools, while percentages in the comparison site schools increased.

• The nutritional health of children in the project sites improved significantly. This was attributed to the wide range of food and nutrition programs developed as part of Better Beginnings.

• There were improvements in parents’ health promotion and disease prevention behaviour, both for themselves and their children. Parents in the Highfield Better Beginnings site also showed improvements in a broad range of measures including parenting practices and attitudes, and social-emotional functioning.
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- Parents in the project sites reported decreased domestic violence with their adult partners and improved marital relationships.

- There was improvement in general neighbourhood satisfaction and improvement in housing satisfaction across the project sites.

- All project sites developed organizational structures that successfully involved local residents in all aspects of project operation.

- All sites created partnerships with other local service and educational organizations, resulting in significant new resources and enriched programming in each site through joint planning and service delivery.

- The average costs across all sites was approximately $1,130 per child per year, which is quite modest compared to several well-known U.S. prevention projects, which reported annual per child or per family costs ranging from $4,300 to $21,000 in 1997 Canadian dollars.

- As the projects strengthened and stabilized over the demonstration period, each project increasingly gained the respect and support of not only the local residents, service providers and community leaders, but also the Provincial Government, which in 1997 transferred all projects to annualized program funding.


In 2000, the RCU received funding for a medium-term follow-up study of the Better Beginnings project covering the years 2000 to 2005. This medium term follow-up research provided an excellent opportunity to add valuable knowledge concerning the relative effectiveness of this unique prevention project in improving the lives of Ontario children and their families living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The focus of this current report is on the findings from the first wave of longitudinal follow-up data collected from children and their families from the older child sites.

The objectives of the medium-term follow-up research for the older child sites were as follows:

- To determine effects of the Better Beginnings programs on Grade 6 children and their families three years after ending program involvement.

- To identify pathways through which the Better Beginnings programs are influencing the Grade 6 outcomes.
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- To relate short-term program costs to medium-term potential cost savings through reductions in such outcomes as grade repetition, serious emotional and behavioural problems, use of specialized education, social and health services, and early indicators of delinquency and substance use/abuse.

- To evaluate the sustainability of the local Better Beginnings organizations and to determine the extent to which resident participation and involvement, partnerships created with other service providers and educational organizations, and broader community initiatives are being sustained in each Better Beginnings site.

The current report presents findings related to the first three objectives mentioned above. Specifically, differences on a variety of measures among Grade 6 children and their families in the older child Better Beginnings sites and comparison sites are examined; as well, comparisons are made with a nationally representative sample of children of the same age drawn from the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. Potential pathways through which Better Beginnings had an effect are also explored. Finally, short-term program costs are related to medium-term potential cost savings.

The fourth objective, the sustainability of the local Better Beginnings organizations, was addressed in a report in July 2005 (this report is available on the Better Beginnings web site at: http://bbbf.queensu.ca/pub.html)

SUMMARY OF KEY MEDIUM-TERM FINDINGS IN THE OLDER CHILD SITES

1. Participation in the Better Beginnings project increased social support and connection to their local neighbourhoods for Grade 6 children and their parents.

Better Beginnings children are seen by their parents as more prosocial and having more people who are important in their lives. These children report having more people to whom they feel they can talk to about personal problems and they report having more friends than average Canadian Grade 6 children. Also, Better Beginnings children have begun doing odd jobs in their community more often than children from the comparison sites. Parents from the Better Beginnings sites report more social support, better family functioning, better access to medical specialists and a stronger sense of community involvement.

These positive outcomes for both children and their parents are consistent with the major emphases of the Better Beginnings programs. The child-focused programs emphasized the learning of social skills and positive relationships with peers and adults, through frequent activities in a variety of school and community settings. Programs for parents both in the home and in the community were designed to improve feelings of support, to provide better understanding of their children, to provide information about family and community resources, as well as encouragement to become more involved in the Better Beginnings programs and other neighbourhood activities.
2. Children from the Better Beginnings sites showed better school functioning in Grade 6 which was linked to positive social skills and relationships at Grade 3.

A higher percentage of Better Beginnings children were at or above grade level in EQAO math achievement; a lower percentage of Better Beginnings children were receiving special education services; a lower percentage had learning problems; a lower percentage had ever repeated a grade or been suspended; and a lower percentage showed severe hyperactivity-inattention problems in school than children from the comparison sites.

The set of positive outcomes from parents, teachers, and school records (EQAO math) indicate that Better Beginnings children were showing better adjustment to primary school in Grade 6. Further, path analyses demonstrated that several of these school adjustment outcomes were mediated by positive social skills and relationships in school at Grade 3.

Other longitudinal studies have reported that more adaptive school functioning in primary schools is an important predictor of social and school success in later adolescence. Thus, the findings of positive school functioning in Grade 6 children from the Better Beginnings project bodes well for more adaptive functioning as they develop into adolescence.

3. Better Beginnings children were positively influenced by the health promotion activities in the programs offered.

There was continued evidence that children from the Better Beginnings sites have better diets, continuing the trend in the short-term findings resulting from the introduction of breakfast and other nutrition programs in all three Better Beginnings sites. Children from the Better Beginnings sites were less exposed to second-hand smoke compared to children from the comparison site. Also, as mentioned previously, parents from the Better Beginnings sites were more like to use a medical specialist for their children.

The following cohort of Grade 6 children from the Better Beginnings sites were more likely to use a seatbelt and bicycle helmet, and were less likely to experiment with alcohol. These outcomes likely resulted from the general emphasis on positive behaviours and attitudes, in all the Better Beginnings learning and support programs for children offered in school, before and after school, as well as during the summer.

4. There is little indication that the Better Beginnings programs have been effective in reducing or preventing serious emotional or behavioural problems in Grade 6 children, or in improving parenting behaviours.

A major goal of the Better Beginnings project is to reduce the incidence of serious long-term emotional and behavioural problems in children. Four types of these problems were measured in the Grade 6 children: emotional-anxiety disorder, hyperactivity-inattention, physical aggression and delinquency. The one positive Better Beginnings effect on these four childhood problems
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was that teacher ratings of severe hyperactivity-inattention disorder indicated a lower percentage of children from the Better Beginnings sites with this problem. This is a significant finding because it may have played a role in Better Beginnings children’s school functioning at Grade 6.

A higher percentage of parents from the Better Beginnings sites rated their children as showing severe physical aggression problems than those from the comparison sites, and more than the Canadian average. Also, the children in the Better Beginnings focal research cohort showed higher average ratings of their own physical aggression than those from the comparison sites. However, there were no differences between the sites on the teacher ratings of the children’s physical aggression, and, as reported previously, teachers rated fewer children from the Better Beginnings sites as showing severe hyperactivity-inattention. These results, than, suggest that the differences in physical aggression occurred primarily in the home situation.

Better Beginnings parents also rated themselves as showing more hostile-ineffective parenting behaviours when interacting with their children than parents from the comparison sites. These hostile-ineffective parenting behaviours were strongly related to parents’ ratings of their child’s physical aggression, suggesting the coercive reciprocal interaction process between parent and child identified by Gerald Patterson and colleagues in research with aggressive children and their parents.

5. **Given the modest costs of operating the local Better Beginnings projects, the outcomes for the Grade 6 children and their families provide early indications of positive economic benefits of the project in the future.**

Several economic analyses on the Grade 6 outcome data were carried out, including cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses.

It is important to remember that the economic analyses are preliminary and are presented only as an example and first step in the calculation of subsequent analyses rather than as a critical test of the overall cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures project. It is now well documented in the research literature that positive economic analyses of prevention interventions involving preschool and early primary school-aged children are based on long-term benefits that begin to accrue to program children in mid to late adolescence, resulting from such outcomes as reduced criminality, and increased educational achievement and attainment (Aos et al., 2004).

Despite the preliminary nature of the economic analyses presented in this report, however, cost savings to government have been identified, resulting from lower educational costs for children from the Better Beginnings project sites and higher projected benefits from increased educational attainment of their parents. These educational benefits are similar to those recently reported by Reynolds et al. (2004) in a 17-year follow-up of children from the Chicago Parent-Child Center preschool program, and bode well for further economic benefits from the Better Beginnings, Better Futures project resulting from the children’s educational achievement and attainment through secondary school and beyond.
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The full economic impacts of the Better Beginnings project will not be known until the children develop through adolescence into young adulthood. Several outcomes at Grade 6, however, suggest the potential for future economic benefits.

IMPLICATIONS

Programs encouraging social skills and social support play a key role in Better Beginnings neighbourhoods.

The extensive social interaction, learning and support experiences provided by the Better Beginnings programs during the early primary school years, both in the school environment as well as in the community settings, likely contributed to the development of children’s social skills in Grade 3 which then led to more adaptive school functioning in Grade 6. Children learned to interact more effectively with peers and adults. The Better Beginnings programs also may have improved children’s relationship skills and connections with their teachers, as well as being more task-focused in a group setting. Fewer students showing severe hyperactivity-inattention behaviours would enable interactions with teachers to be more educationally focused.

Similar results from the Montreal Longitudinal Prevention (MLP) experiment involving highly disruptive young boys and their parents have been reported by Tremblay et al. (1995). The MLP intervention program consisted of two years of social skills and self-control training groups for the boys in Grades 2 and 3, and two years of parent-training groups for their mothers. Data collected on the boys several years later when they were in Grades 5 and 6 indicated significantly better scores on an “index of school adjustment” for the intervention group of boys compared to boys in the control group. The school adjustment index included teacher ratings of disruptive behaviour as well as whether the child was receiving special education services or had repeated a grade (Tremblay et al., 1996). Subsequently, these boys showed less delinquency and higher rates of school completion in later adolescence. The results of this long-term longitudinal outcome study found that improved school adjustment in the primary school years resulting from the MLP programs was an important predictor of successful social and academic success in late adolescence (Vitaro et al., 1999).

The importance of establishing positive social skills and relationships in young children has recently been highlighted by James Heckman, 2000 Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences:

“An important lesson to draw from the Perry Pre-school programme, and, indeed the entire literature on successful early interventions, is that it is the social skills and motivation of the child that are more easily altered – not I.Q. These social and emotional skills affect performance in school and in the workplace. Academics have a bias toward believing that cognitive skills are of fundamental importance to success in life. Because of this, the relatively low malleability of I.Q.s after early ages has led many to proclaim a variety of interventions to be ineffective.

Yet the evidence from the Perry Pre-school programme reveals that these programmes are highly effective in reducing criminal activity, promoting social skills and integrating
disadvantaged people into mainstream society. The greatest benefits of these programmes are on socialization and not I.Q. Social skills and motivation have large pay-offs in the labour market so these programmes have the potential for large pay-offs.” (Heckman, 2000, pp. 31-32)

These findings underscore the importance of the more positive social and school functioning shown by the Grade 6 children from the Better Beginnings project sites.

**Better Beginnings projects need more intensive parent and child programs.**

The parent and child programs provided by the three Better Beginnings projects were universal programs, available to all 4 to 8 year old children and their parents in the project neighbourhoods. These programs are associated with a variety of positive outcomes in social functioning and support for both parents and children, and also provided an important pathway to children’s positive school functioning. However, they were not effective in reducing children’s serious emotional or behavioural problems, or parents’ hostile-ineffective interaction with their children. These results suggest the need for more intensive parent and child programs for those children showing serious emotional and behavioural problems. Based on recent “best practice” research, these targeted programs should include intensive, systematic training programs for parents and enriched intensive school-based social skills programs for children (Greenberg, Domitrovich & Bumbarger, 2001).

Identifying children and parents who require these additional intensive programs could easily be done by Better Beginnings staff currently operating the universal programs. Combining universal programs with more intensive, targeted parent training and children’s social skills groups is a strategy currently being evaluated in the FAST TRACK Project being implemented in four disadvantaged communities in the U.S. (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2000).

Program acceptance has been a major challenge for many intervention projects for children and parents introduced in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and schools. For example, so few parents attended a group parent-training program in the Helping Children Adjust program (Boyle et al., 1999) that it had to be dropped from the project. Indeed, research studies have found that one-third of families fail to respond to parent-training programs (Webster-Stratton, 1993), and that an important factor related to treatment failure is lack of parental social support (Dumas & Albin, 1986).

Webster-Stratton (1992), whose program The Incredible Years is one of the most widely used and researched parent training program in North America, has recently observed that parent training programs must be designed not only to help parents adopt strategies that promote their children’s social competence and reduce severe behaviour problems, but also to support their need to become engaged citizens. For low-income families particularly, she claims that parent training programs need to focus more broadly on building community networks and parent support (Webster-Stratton, 1997).
Fostering social support and community networks is exactly what the universal Better Beginnings parent and child programs are accomplishing. Therefore, Better Beginnings neighbourhoods appear to be well prepared to successfully implement more intensive parent and child intervention programs with children showing severe emotional or behavioural problems.

In their research examining the relationships between NLSCY parenting data, risk factors and measures of children’s development in Canada, Landy and Tam (1996) conclude with the following policy implications:

“Intervention services for children need to emphasize:
  o building strong communities that can form a basis of social support for families without other support systems;
  o working with families – particularly those identified as being at-risk – to improve family functioning;
  o providing intensive services for children exposed to multiple risk factors. These services should focus on enhancing parenting practices as well as providing support;
  o providing training to parents to encourage positive parenting practices and techniques and also to inform them of the serious effects of hostile-ineffective parenting styles;
  o providing community parent-support programs such as accessible, welcoming toy-lending libraries, drop-in centre and parent support centres”. (pp.109-110)

By incorporating more intensive intervention programs for children who show serious emotional and behavioural problems, the local Better Beginnings projects will be meeting all of Landy and Tam’s criteria for successful intervention services for children.

**NEXT STEPS FOR THE BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH STUDY**

In 1990, the Ontario Ministries of Community and Social Services, Education, and Health announced the Better Beginnings, Better Futures project as a “25 year longitudinal research demonstration project” (Ontario Government, 1990). Four phases to the research project were described:

- Phase I: Development of research methodology;
- Phase II: Implementation of data collection;
- Phase III: Reports of initial (short-term) findings; and
- Phase IV: Longitudinal follow-up.

The present report describes the findings from the first wave of longitudinal follow-up research carried out with children and their families from the older child Better Beginnings and comparison sites when the children were in Grade 6, three years after the report of short-term findings in 2000. Further longitudinal follow-up data collection is scheduled when these children are in Grade 9, Grade 12, and then when they are in their early twenties.
There are several important reasons for carrying out longitudinal follow-up studies of projects implemented with young children and their families. First, short-term outcome effects at the end of a project may deteriorate quickly over time, yielding no long-term benefits, or may strengthen and expand over time as children develop, yielding greater benefits than would be expected from the short-term outcomes. A good example of the latter phenomenon is the Montreal Longitudinal Prevention experiment (Tremblay et al., 1996). The project provided social skills training for aggressive boys when they were in Grades 2 and 3 (7 to 9 years of age) and parent-training for their mothers. At the end of the two year intervention, there were no positive effects for the intervention group on any of the measures of emotional and behavioural problems or on the children’s prosocial behaviour. Parent ratings of their son’s disruptive behaviours were actually higher for the intervention group than the control group (Tremblay et al., 1991). Three years after the program ended, however, when the boys were 11 to 12 years of age, positive school behaviour differences in favour of the project group began to appear and continued to strengthen over the next three years as the boys moved into middle adolescence. If this study had not included a longitudinal follow-up of the children, it would have been deemed ineffective. However, the longitudinal follow-up results make it a “model” or “best practice” project, the only Canadian project in Mrazek and Brown’s (2002) review of effective early childhood programs that included a long-term follow-up of program participants. The longitudinal follow-up study of Better Beginnings children is designed to determine long-term effects of the project as children develop into adolescence.

Second, longitudinal follow-up studies of early childhood intervention projects allow for an analysis of the mechanisms of change or pathways of development through which the intervention project influences long-term outcomes. Identifying longitudinal pathways increases the generalizability of findings, aids in subsequent program design and improvement, and strengthens causal inferences by providing explanations of how program effects are transmitted over time (Reynolds et al., 2004). In the present report, a pathway of Better Beginnings effects was identified consisting of improved social functioning as rated by Grade 3 teachers leading to better school adaptation in Grade 6. Data collected when these children are in Grades 9, 12, and entering young adulthood may reveal other important pathways.

Third, many important benefits, especially those that benefit society at large, do not appear until children develop into later adolescence and early adulthood. For example, many of the measures of children’s delinquent behaviour and educational attainment in previous studies (Karoly et al., 1998, Masse & Barnett, 2002) that have yielded significant cost-benefits for several model early childhood programs could not be collected until the youth were 15 years and older. Therefore, the Better Beginnings, Better Futures Research Study is designed to follow the children from the Better Beginnings and comparison sites through adolescence into young adulthood in order to be able to determine the full economic impacts of the Better Beginnings project.
CONCLUSION

In summary, the results present a picture of generally positive impacts of the Better Beginnings project on Grade 6 children and their families three years after ending project involvement in Grade 3.

Better outcomes resulted in the areas of school functioning, health promotion and health risk prevention for the Grade 6 children from the Better Beginnings neighbourhoods, as well as greater feelings of social, emotional and neighbourhood support by the children and their parents. Preliminary economic analyses indicate that cost-savings to government are beginning to appear resulting from lower educational costs for children from the project sites and the increased educational attainment of their parents.

Taken together, these results suggest that the Better Beginnings project is leading to better futures for some of Ontario’s most vulnerable children and their families.