



# Building Connections for Valley Families

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**A Social Innovation  
Initiative to improve the  
systems that support  
childhood well-being in  
the Comox Valley**

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An initiative of the Comox Valley  
Early Years Collaborative  
Comox Valley, BC





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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We humbly acknowledge that the work of the Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative and the Building Connections for Valley Families Project has taken place on the unceded territory of the K'ómoks First Nation. It is a privilege and an honour to live and work on these traditional lands.

### Steering Committee & Project Team:

Community collaboration is the foundation of the Building Connections Project. We are extremely grateful for the involvement and contribution of participating service agencies, organizations and community leaders. In particular, the wisdom and effort of a very skilled and committed Steering Committee has guided the project from the beginning. We would like to thank our Steering Committee members, both past and present:

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- Curtis Cameron, Director of Operations, Ministry of Children and Family Development
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## Research Support

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## To our Funders

We are deeply grateful for the funding that made this project possible. The *Building Connections* Project was initially funded by an Island Health *Community Wellness Grant* (2019-2021). Subsequently, we received a grant from the Comox Valley Community Foundation through Vancouver Foundation's *Robert and Florence Filberg Fund for Medical (Health) Research*, which provided three additional years of funding to continue to grow and expand this project (2020-2023).

## To the Parents

Finally, we thank the parents and caregivers from across the Comox Valley who have graciously shared their stories, their triumphs, their pain, and their experiences with us. These last few years have been extraordinarily complex and complicated for families across the globe, and we admire your collective strength and resolve in working to provide your children the very best start. We hope that through this project, and through the involvement of parents and caregivers like you in the community, we can create a better, more supportive system to help our children thrive.



# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Background and Community Context</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Measuring Health and Well-being in the Early Years</b>	<b>5</b>
What is the Early Development Instrument (EDI)?	6
Using EDI data to spark neighbourhood-level change	6
<b>Changing the system that supports childhood well-being in our community</b>	<b>7</b>
What is systems thinking?	7
The Social Innovation Lab Approach	8
Why use a neighbourhood approach?	10
<b>Methodology and Project Phases</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>PHASE 1: DATA GATHERING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>12</b>
Surveys	12
Focus Groups / Conversation Circles	12
Service Provider Sessions	13
<b>PHASE 2: ANALYSIS OF DATA AND PLAN DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>14</b>
Data Sorting	14
Data Maps	14
Innovation Workshops	14
<b>PHASE 3: IMPLEMENT, EVALUATE, AND ADAPT NEIGHBOURHOOD-LEVEL INNOVATIONS</b>	<b>15</b>
Diverse paths to implementation	15
Building capacity and sustainability through partnerships	15
<b>Neighbourhood Social Lab Summaries</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>NORTH COMOX VALLEY</b>	<b>16</b>
Summary of North Comox Valley research & community engagement	16
Summary of North Comox Valley innovation plan development	16
<b>SOUTH COMOX VALLEY</b>	<b>17</b>
Summary of South Comox Valley research & community engagement	17
Summary of South Comox Valley innovation plan development	18
<b>COURTENAY</b>	<b>19</b>
Summary of Courtenay research & community engagement	19
Summary of Courtenay innovation plan development	20
<b>COMOX</b>	<b>21</b>
Summary of Comox research & community engagement	21
Summary of Comox innovation plan development	22
<b>Where are we now? Where are we headed?</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>25</b>




## Background and Community Context

The Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative (CVEYC) is a network of over 50 individuals and organizations committed to improving the lives of children in the Comox Valley. The CVEYC shares a vision where all children and families are supported and thrive in our community, with a mission to collectively engage, educate, and inform our communities to enhance early years supports and services for children, their families, and the broader community.

One of the guiding principles of the CVEYC is **Systems Change**: we embrace innovative, creative, and insightful approaches to change using child and family-focused knowledge. The CVEYC made a commitment to strive to reduce early childhood vulnerability and increase early years well-being for all children in our community. We aim to identify and build on the strengths of this community in how it supports and encourages young children to thrive and develop physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

The **Building Connections for Valley Families Project** (*Building Connections* Project) is founded on the belief that we can work together as a community to increase children's health in the early years in the Comox Valley.

### In the Building Connections Project, we aim to:

-  **BUILD ON STRENGTHS.** We aim to build on the current strengths of family supports and resources in the Comox Valley.
-  **DETERMINE NEEDS.** We aim to determine additional needs identified by families that would help support them in raising children in the Comox Valley.
-  **ADDRESS BARRIERS.** We aim to address the current barriers experienced by families in accessing the supports and resources they need in the Comox Valley.

## Measuring Health and Well-being in the Early Years

A child's first years are fundamental for lifelong health and development. Early experiences critically impact young children's physical, intellectual and social-emotional development, and these experiences create a foundation for later growth, learning, and wellness. Family environments, peer interaction, literacy and language exposure, socio-economic factors, access to health care and community resources, and early learning activities are just some of the many experiences that affect a child's developmental outcomes and well-being.

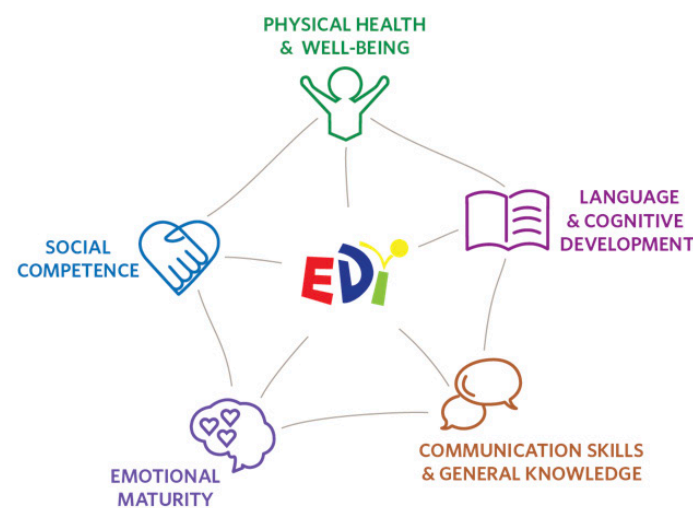
Research consistently shows that more nurturing and supportive early environments promote childhood well-being (Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007). These positive, enriching environments go beyond those that children may experience within their own homes – these experiences also involve the connections and interactions they experience in their neighbourhoods and communities: “the nurturant qualities of the environments where children grow up, live and learn matter the most for their development...parents and other caregivers want to provide these nurturant opportunities for their children, but they need support from community and government at all levels” (Irwin et al, 2007).

Among the CVEYC, one key piece of research that drives conversations about supportive early environments in our community comes from the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at the University of British Columbia (UBC).

[HELP](#) has been measuring the trends and patterns in the development of kindergarten-aged children in British Columbia for more than 20 years. Through their research, HELP examines how various environments, experiences, contexts and systems influence child development in communities across the province.

### What is the Early Development Instrument (EDI)?

HELP's [Early Development Instrument \(EDI\)](#) is used across BC to measure the developmental health of kindergarten children, and includes five scales that measure: physical health & well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language & cognitive development, and communication skills & general knowledge.



EDI data serve as a reflection of the quality of environments children are exposed to in their earliest years of development.

Kindergarten teachers complete these questionnaires for the children in their classrooms. Every three years data are combined and compiled into "waves" of data for each school district/neighbourhood. EDI data have been collected in eight waves over two decades, allowing researchers, policy-makers, service providers, community leaders and parents to identify how child development characteristics are changing across the province.

### Using EDI data to spark neighbourhood-level change

In 2018, the CVEYC [reviewed a recent wave of EDI data](#) (Wave 6, 2013-2016) for the Comox Valley area. At that time, trends across the province showed that the majority of kindergarten-aged children in BC (over 67%) were doing very well in terms of early childhood development outcomes. In the Comox Valley, we saw similar trends, in that the majority of the children growing up in this community (60%) were meeting or exceeding developmental norms.

The CVEYC envisioned an improvement in these results, so that more children in our community would experience improved well-being in their earliest and most important years of development. These data gave us an opportunity to step back and identify how well families with young children are being supported and are accessing the resources they need, and how service providers and professionals can better connect with families, in order to improve early childhood outcomes in the Comox Valley.

As an initial step in realizing this vision, the CVEYC commissioned a research report in 2018 (the *25 x 25 Project*; Hodge Kwan and Smyth, 2019). This report recommended a number of specific activities to progress toward the CVEYC's vision of improving early childhood outcomes in the Comox Valley, through the implementation of a community-driven project that strengthens the systems that support children in our community.

In 2019, the CVEYC launched this community-driven project to connect and engage with members of the Comox Valley community in order to improve early childhood outcomes – which we call the **Building Connections for Valley Families** Project.

### Changing the system that supports childhood well-being in our community

#### What is systems thinking?

We often think of a system as an organization, but simply put, a system is any group of things that interact towards a common goal. *(The goal may not be explicit to all, nor intended.)*

Understanding and ultimately changing the system that supports child development for the better first requires us to take a step back, heighten our awareness and suspend our assumptions and beliefs. It requires us to take a whole new look at what contributes to children's development in our community.

In *Systems Thinking Through Social Change*, David Peter Stroh (2015) outlines the differences between conventional thinking and systems thinking:

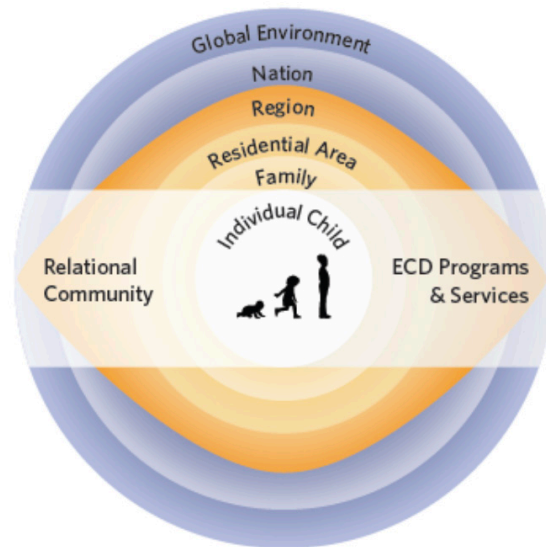
- Conventional thinking** assumes that the connection between problems and their causes is obvious and easy to trace. In **systems thinking**, the relationship between problems and their causes is indirect and not obvious.
- Conventional thinking** assumes other people and events are to blame for the problems and must be changed. **Systems thinking** recognizes that we unwittingly contribute to the problems and can influence changing them (we are the system).
- Conventional thinking** assumes an intervention designed to achieve short term success will also assure long-term success. **Systems thinking** recognizes that most quick fixes have unintended consequences. They make no difference or can make matters worse in the long run.
- Conventional thinking** assumes that in order to optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts. **Systems thinking** recognizes that in order to optimize the whole we must improve the relationships between the parts.

Putting systems thinking into practice, the focus of our work is to understand and ultimately **improve the systems that support childhood** well-being in the Comox Valley. HELP has developed a model for understanding the numerous and complex environments in which children grow and develop. The Total Environment Assessment Model of Early Child Development (TEAM-ECD) provides a way to visualize these nested and interconnected environments, which interact with one another to influence children's health and well-being (HELP, 2013).








"The TEAM-ECD model illustrates the connections between environments and key influences that relate to children's early development."  
Human Early Learning Partnership, 2013

Situated at the centre of the model is **the child**, who lives within a series of environments – from the most intimate, **the family** environment, which provides "the primary source of influence in shaping children's early development"; to the residential **community environment**, which includes formal early years supports and programs, as well as more relational, emotional, and informal social network supports; to the broadest environments, which include political/institutional/societal factors in **regional, national, and even global environments**, and govern supports such as access to a living wage, access to childcare, and access to healthcare. At any level in this system, "the more positive and supportive the environments, the richer they are in supporting children to develop, grow, and learn" (HELP, 2013).



While the work of the **Building Connections** project considers all of these environments, the primary focus of our efforts has been the community, or neighbourhood environment.

The **Building Connections** Project assumes the following underlying principles are true for the systems that support child development in our community:

-  **Children thrive in healthy environments.**
-  **Children's development is complex. It is impacted by individual, family, community and broader societal factors.**
-  **Parents know what is best for their children.**
-  **Parents do the best they can for their children within their context and circumstances.**
-  **Parents and community residents are the most effective leaders in local change.**



### The Social Innovation Lab Approach

The **Building Connections** Project implemented a **social innovation lab approach** (Westley & Laban, 2015) to understand and improve the child-serving systems in the Comox Valley. Social innovation labs offer an approach to tackling complex societal challenges that require **systems thinking and systems change**. In order to fully address complex societal challenges, one must "change the system dynamics that created the problem in the first place."

Reducing childhood vulnerability and improving childhood well-being are fitting examples of such complex challenges.

Westley and Laban (2015) define a **social innovation** as "any initiative (product, process, program, project or platform) that challenges and, over time, contributes to changing the defining routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of the broader social system in which it is introduced." In the context of the **Building Connections** Project, we worked with members of our community to identify how the **current system** functions to support childhood well-being in our community, and how a **future system** could offer solutions and initiatives that would change the course of childhood vulnerability at a systemic level within the community.

Social innovation labs provide a structured process for approaching complex challenges, and a safe and creative environment to try **neighbourhood-level innovations** to address them. They also enable deep collaboration among multi-disciplinary teams and diverse stakeholders, and take a user-centered approach as opposed to institution- or organization-centered approaches. All aspects of the social innovation lab approach align with the foundational intention and principles of the **Building Connections** Project.



Through a social innovation lab approach, the **Building Connections** Project process occurred in three phases:

#### 1 **Data gathering and community engagement.**

Working with local parents and families, as well as service providers and other community members, we conducted parent surveys and focus groups in the community, learning about families' experiences raising young children in the community.

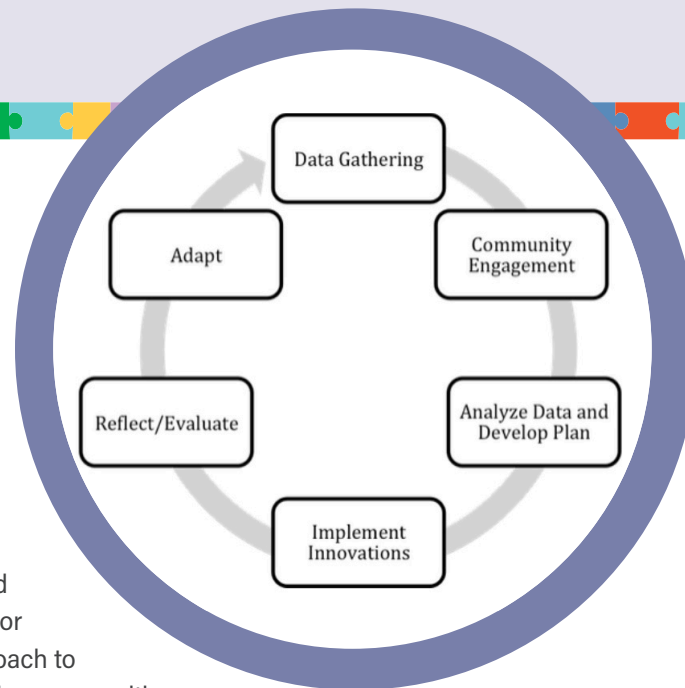
#### 2 **Analysis of data and plan development.**

At this stage of the process, we combined the information gathered from the community and created maps of the current and future systems that support childhood well-being in the Comox Valley. Together with residents, researchers, service providers and local leaders, we then worked to develop neighbourhood-level, realistic innovation plans to increase and enhance innovative supports for all families with young children.

#### 3 **Implement, evaluate, and adapt innovations.**

In this phase of the project, we implement the 'prototypes' of our local neighbourhood-level plans for innovation in the community. Further engagement with members of the community will enable us to evaluate and adapt these innovations moving forward.

Importantly, we intended for all components of the project to be developed within a continuous cycle of learning and adaptation.







The Building Connections project began in 2019 in the North Comox Valley neighbourhood, and continued through the other 3 neighbourhoods: South Comox Valley, Courtenay, and Comox.

### Why use a neighbourhood approach?

In the *Building Connections* Project, we have organized the project around the four EDI neighbourhoods determined by the Human Early Learning Partnership (see Appendix A for EDI Neighbourhoods Map). We use a 'neighbourhood' approach to increase supports and build connectedness for families in the communities or neighbourhoods in which they live. The neighbourhood approach ensures any community innovations are tied to a specific area and led by parents living there. This also allows us to align our findings with subsequent EDI results and to easily access other research data that HELP also gathers for these geographies.

The four Comox Valley neighbourhoods are:

-  **North Comox Valley**
-  **South Comox Valley**
-  **Courtenay**
-  **Comox**

Our social innovation lab process largely focused on one of these neighbourhood areas at a time; we started this work in the North Comox Valley in the fall of 2019 (see Project Timeline, Appendix B). We chose the North Comox Valley as a starting point because of its diverse family demographics, and because there were fewer resources and activities for families in this area compared to other areas of the Comox Valley. Furthermore, the North Comox Valley showed the highest rates of developmental vulnerability out of the 4 EDI neighbourhoods in Wave 6, reflecting the greatest need for neighbourhood-level innovations. By focusing on one area to start, we were able to establish the social innovation lab process in the North Comox Valley and extend our learnings and approach to the subsequent three communities moving forward.

We continued our work to focus on the South Comox Valley region beginning in fall 2020, and moved our focus into Courtenay and Comox in 2022. In some periods, the data collection and community engagement phases in these areas overlapped with one another. Ultimately, the innovations we developed were community-specific, and data were always organized by and included in the community in which the parents lived. The engagement, planning, and implementation phases in each neighbourhood are described below.







## Methodology and Project Phases

### PHASE 1: DATA GATHERING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Following the social innovation lab approach, the *Building Connections* Project sought to engage parents and caregivers from each of the four Comox Valley neighbourhoods in discussions relating to their experiences raising children in their communities. In order to identify factors that may relate to childhood well-being in each neighbourhood, the first step was to gather information from families and service providers in the community. Parents and caregivers are the experts in their families' lives, and it was crucial to hear their stories and brain-storm solutions with them rather than for them.

#### Surveys

The first method we used to engage members of the community was through a parent-caregiver survey (see Appendix C for survey questions). This survey was designed to elicit information from families in the Comox Valley relating to their experiences raising children in the community, including: a) whether and how often their family accesses programs/supports, and what kinds of programs/supports they access; b) whether and how often they experience barriers to the supports they need; and c) how connected they feel to other members of their neighbourhood and community. There were a number of open-ended questions to allow parents to share additional thoughts and comments. The questions in this survey were developed using input gathered from the *Building Connections* project steering committee. The survey was advertised on social media through members of the CVEYC, through the SD71 schools in the Comox Valley, and at community partner locations throughout the Comox Valley. The survey was administered online through SD71.

Two parent-caregiver surveys were completed at different time points: one in Fall 2019, with a focus on reaching North Comox Valley families, and again in Fall 2020, which included additional questions pertaining to COVID-19. In total, we received 127 survey responses in 2019, and 186 survey responses in 2020. Data were summarized and collated to identify key themes, concerns and issues raised by parents and caregivers, which were then used to guide the creation of subsequent engagement materials (focus group and conversation circle discussion questions) in each community.

#### Focus Groups / Conversation Circles


The second method we used engaged directly with families in each local neighbourhood. A series of focus groups were planned for each community to gather information from families, and further explore their experiences as parents/caregivers raising children in the Comox Valley. Questions and prompts were meant to build upon the feedback we received and themes we identified in the parent-caregiver survey data. Focus groups were advertised on social media through members of the CVEYC, and through the SD71 schools.

Focus groups were held in-person for North Comox Valley families in the fall of 2019. Groups and conversation circles were mainly virtual in the winter-spring of 2021, a necessary modification due to COVID-19. In total we connected with 7 North Comox Valley parents in 2019, and in 2021 we met with 15 parents from the South Comox Valley, 12 from Courtenay, 12 from Comox, and 4 from North Comox Valley. In the winter of 2022, we held an in-person conversation circle for families (7 parents attended) in the Union Bay/Fanny Bay/Royston communities of the South Comox Valley, to gain a better understanding of parent experiences and how best to increase connections for families in those areas. Finally, we modified our engagement approach in summer - fall 2022: we met with parents and caregivers by visiting programs, groups, and drop-in events, in order to build and add to the information we gathered from our 2021 virtual focus groups. We gathered ideas from over 35 parents through a short questionnaire while attending drop-in summer events, and connected with an additional 35 parents in discussions while visiting early years programs and groups.

A theme we noticed in each round of data collected through the parent-caregiver survey was that parents expressed they would like to be more connected to friends and family, regardless of where they live. To explore this aspect of informal community connections further, focus group conversation prompts included statements such as, "Tell us about your experiences connecting with family, friends, and other parents & children in your community (especially with families with children around the same age as yours). What do you think would help improve connectedness among families that want to be more connected with those in their communities?!" We also invited conversation around the patterns of social behaviour parents notice in their children, and asked them to share their experiences watching their children develop their social and emotional capabilities. Many parents shared insights regarding the ways their own mental health and well-being affects or influences their children. We also included prompts to discuss which activities families regularly attend or participate in, and what they feel are the greatest barriers to accessing supports in the Comox Valley.

#### Service Provider Sessions

The third engagement method we employed was to directly connect with early years service providers in the Comox Valley. Doing so allowed us to gain an additional perspective on parent and family experiences, coming from the people and providers who work with them in the community: School District 71 staff, Comox Valley Regional District staff, BGC Central Vancouver Island staff, StrongStart facilitators, Ministry of Children & Family Development staff, Public Health staff, Comox Valley Child Development Association staff, Comox Valley Families Services Association staff, Early Childhood Educators, etc, many of whom also participate in the CVEYC. Conversation prompts included questions about: a) experiences and/or difficulties reaching families in various areas of the Comox Valley, b) what kinds of barriers families face in accessing supports, c) what they've noticed/observed in the families they work with regarding social and emotional development in children, and d) ideas for how to improve connections and supports for families in the community.



We hosted two service provider engagement sessions. The first was held in-person in January 2020, which focused on service provider experiences working with families in the North Comox Valley. In the Spring of 2021, we held a virtual session to gather additional information from service providers who work throughout the Comox Valley, and additional questions were added for participants to reflect on their experiences during COVID-19.

## PHASE 2: ANALYSIS OF DATA AND PLAN DEVELOPMENT

### Data sorting

After community engagement and data collection were complete, responses, quotes, ideas, and comments gathered during focus groups, conversation circles, and engagement sessions were sorted and organized to align with a TEAM ECD model (HELP, 2013). Doing so allowed us to better see the system that currently supports children within each neighbourhood, and to visualize ideas for how and where to leverage change within the system at various levels. When analyzing a comment or idea, we first identified whether the comment pertains to the current system that supports children in the community, or whether it applies more to what a future, better system could look like.

After this initial distinction was made, comments and ideas were then sorted based on which level of the system they pertain to most. Comments and ideas that related specifically to a child's experience were placed in the Child Level. Comments and ideas that related more broadly to the family's experience were placed according to the next level of the map, the Family Level. These were further sorted to differentiate parent-specific experiences and relationships, as well as descriptions of parent-child interactions. Comments and ideas that related to the community environment were placed according to the third level of the map, the Community Level. These included comments about relational/informal connections in the community, formal programs and supports, information or knowledge-based resources, and the physical/geographic qualities of the community. Finally, at the outermost level we placed comments and ideas that relate to Structural/Political/Institutional environments. These included any comments and ideas about cost of living, access to housing, access to childcare, access to health care, and access to transportation.

### Data Maps

Sorted data were then organized into 'maps' to illustrate the systems that support child health and well-being in each neighbourhood, using HELP's TEAM ECD model as a visual guide. For each neighbourhood, two Systems Maps were created: a map of the CURRENT system that supports children in the community, and the vision for a FUTURE system that could better support children in the community. Parent responses were visually placed according to each level of the system, and colour-coded to reflect a strength in the system (in green) or a barrier/challenge in the system (in red). See Appendices D-G for each community's data maps.

### Innovation Workshops

Using the sorted data and data maps as a starting point, we hosted virtual workshops for stakeholders and parents from each community in order to develop innovations that would better support parents and families in the local area. The format of these workshops was based on the social innovation lab framework (Westley & Laban, 2015), modified to fit into shorter timeframes.

In our first neighbourhood, North Comox Valley, we hosted two innovation workshops (Spring 2020 and Fall 2020). The first workshop (Seeing the System) focused on systems thinking and helped us establish a systems framework to organize the information gathered from the community, both at the North Comox Valley neighbourhood level and at the broader, Comox Valley wide level. Participants worked through North Comox Valley data and identified the critical themes that the North Comox Valley innovations should address. The second workshop (Planning Innovations) focused on innovation planning, using the knowledge and themes identified from the first workshop. A list of innovation ideas, including the desirability, feasibility and viability of each idea, was collaboratively created during this second session.

In the three other neighbourhoods (South Comox Valley, Courtenay, and Comox), one workshop was held for each community (Fall 2022 for SCV, Spring 2023 for Courtenay and Comox). We were able to apply our learnings from the initial systems thinking workshop in North Comox Valley, which provided a framework for understanding the broader, community-wide systems that support children in the Comox Valley. This allowed us to streamline the innovation workshop process in our subsequent three neighborhoods and focus on neighbourhood-level innovation planning in each of these areas of the Comox Valley.

## PHASE 3: IMPLEMENT, EVALUATE, AND ADAPT NEIGHBOURHOOD-LEVEL INNOVATIONS

### Diverse paths to implementation

The focus of the current report is on the first two phases of the social innovation lab process: the accrual of community-specific information from families who live in each area, the identification of the current and future systems that support local children, and the planning and designing of innovation ideas which aim to bring each neighbourhood closer to their future system. The development, establishment, and maintenance of these innovation ideas requires immense planning and coordination, processes which are specific to each area and diverse in their paths toward implementation. Because the innovations we designed are specific to each community, and meet the needs of the families who live there, separate processes have unfolded – and will continue to unfold – in each neighbourhood. After innovations are designed in each community, working groups are formed, potential streams of funding are identified, and in some cases dedicated staff are hired to move forward with neighbourhood-specific implementation of innovations in Phase 3. Individual paths for Innovation Development and Evaluation have been and will be created for each area (see the Neighbourhood Innovations Report, which describe these steps in detail).

### Building capacity and sustainability through partnerships

Across all 4 neighbourhoods, implementation of the innovations developed with and for each community depend on partnerships with child-serving community organizations and other dedicated stakeholders. *Building Connections* understands that, especially for non-profit and social impact organizational partners, there are often limited resources available to support and establish these innovative ideas; plans are developed with an eye to reorganizing existing supports or introducing low-cost initiatives. Trusting, collaborative relationships with diverse partners ensures the innovations we've developed with and for our local parents are sustainable, and that the people and groups who make these innovations possible have the capacity to continue to improve the lives of children in our community. For the CVEYC, one of our guiding principles is **Connectedness**: we strive to collaborate through strong and supportive relationships with each other (professionally) and each service (organizationally) to create a growing web of care around families. These partnerships are key to the success of the *Building Connections* project, in our work to date and well into the future.





## Neighbourhood Social Lab Summaries

### NORTH COMOX VALLEY

The area defined as the North Comox Valley is mostly rural, very broad and demographically diverse. It roughly spans the areas of Saratoga Beach, Miracle Beach, Black Creek, Merville, Bates Beach, Kitty Coleman, and CFB Comox. Children who live in this community attend Miracle Beach Elementary School, Huband Park Elementary School, and Airport Elementary School.

#### Summary of North Comox Valley research & community engagement

In 2019-2020, we completed the data collection and community engagement phase of our North Comox Valley social lab (see Appendix B for project timeline). In line with the social innovation lab framework, we then analyzed and organized this data to better understand the current landscape of child-serving systems in the North Comox Valley area (see attached data maps, Appendix D).

#### We learned that:

The current system is largely organized around centralized services and site-based programming, which can contribute to inaccessibility and creates challenges in connecting with families in rural areas.

The professionalization of current supports and services means these services are “expert-driven”, which can be less welcoming for some families; this also creates challenges around building relationships and supporting the unique strengths of each family.

The current system largely benefits those parents and families who a) have the resources (including education, financial, transportation, time) to seek supports; b) are comfortable with professionals and the expert-model, and/or c) are well-connected in the community and have access to reliable transportation to reach the city-centre.

The current system is largely disadvantageous to those parents and families who a) have fewer resources (including education, financial, transportation, time) to seek supports; b) feel uncomfortable with/intimidated by large groups and/or an expert-model of services; c) are new to the community or have fewer connections; and/or d) have difficulty reaching the city-centre (due to reliable transportation, family schedules, time).

#### Summary of North Comox Valley innovation plan development

We hosted two virtual workshops for stakeholders and parents from the North Comox Valley community in order to develop innovations that would better support parents and families in the area. In our first workshop, participants worked through North Comox Valley data and identified the critical themes that the North Comox Valley innovations should address. These themes included a) exploring new ways of engaging families and building community; b) expanding existing supports to rural areas; c) supporting parents; and d) building organizational partnerships.

These innovations create connection points for parents, as it became clear in our conversations with North Comox Valley parents that a primary motivator for them is based on relationships:

- **Innovation 1:** Create community drop-in programs within the North Comox Valley.  
 The idea here is to offer a central, local space for families to meet their neighbours. These drop-ins provide opportunities for easier connections outside program times, reduce transportation barriers, and give families a space to gather informally without an agenda.
- **Innovation 2:** Create a Family Connector role that enriches the drop-in programs in several ways.  
 This rural outreach position looks for further ways to connect with local families, acts as a listening ear to parenting challenges, and provides a link between families and family-based services & resources, making referrals if necessary.

### SOUTH COMOX VALLEY

The area defined as the South Comox Valley is another mostly rural and extremely vast geography. It includes the communities of Fanny Bay, Union Bay, Royston, and Cumberland, as well as Denman and Hornby Islands. Children who live in the South Comox Valley communities attend Royston Elementary School, Cumberland Community School, Denman Island Community School, and Hornby Island Community School.

#### Summary of South Comox Valley research & community engagement

In 2020-2022, we completed the data collection and community engagement phase of our South Comox Valley social lab. In line with the social innovation lab framework, we then analyzed and organized this data to better understand the current landscape of child-serving systems in the South Comox Valley area (see Appendix E for data maps).

#### We learned that:

The current system can be difficult to navigate for newcomers to these South Comox Valley communities. Many new families are moving to the South Comox Valley, and many are unsure of the supports and services available to them. These existing challenges and barriers were compounded by COVID-19 and the closure/suspension of many facilities/resources/programs.

The current system benefits those that live in more centralized locations, as traveling sometimes long distances to town for programs, services, and clinic appointments is challenging for families.

The current system is lacking adequate support for/information about family mental health, which concerns both children and their parents. COVID-19 highlighted, and in many cases exacerbated, the stress and mental health concerns faced by families; parents are aware of and concerned about the potentially long-term effects that social and physical isolation have had on their children’s development and well-being.

Families who face multiple, systemic barriers (difficulty accessing affordable housing, childcare, transportation, and/or nutritious food) are at a greater disadvantage in the current system, and experience the greatest need for support.

### Summary of South Comox Valley innovation plan development

We hosted an in-person workshop with parents, service providers, and local government representatives from the South Comox Valley communities in order to develop innovations that would better support parents and families in the area.

Because of the vast distances, and in many cases differences, between the communities that compose the South Comox Valley, we decided to further separate this EDI neighbourhood into 3 subgroups for the purposes of innovation plan development: 1) Union Bay/Fanny Bay/Royston, 2) Cumberland, and 3) Denman and Hornby Island. Individual community summary reports were created for each of these three subgroups (see Appendix H for 3 South Comox Valley community summary reports). We focused our efforts on planning innovations for the Union Bay/Fanny Bay/Royston communities, as well as for Cumberland. These two areas exhibited the greatest need for additional supports, services, and connection opportunities for families, as reflected in our community engagement data and in the EDI reports.

In our workshop, we identified the critical themes that the South Comox Valley innovations should address. These themes included a) creating socially-connected neighbourhoods that are inclusive to all families; b) increasing local access to supports to meet the needs of our local children; c) supporting children to become socially comfortable and confident, with tools to manage anxiety and encourage healthy development; d) ensuring that parents feel connected to and supported by their community, in order to manage stress and improve their own well-being.

A list of innovation ideas was collaboratively created during our workshop for the Cumberland and Union Bay/Fanny Bay/Royston communities. After considering the desirability, feasibility and viability of the innovation ideas generated in the workshop, we decided to pursue the following two innovations. As in the North Comox Valley innovations, these ideas create connection points for parents and for service providers:

#### **Innovation 1: Create a Cumberland-specific Early Years Collaborative.**

The purpose of this innovation is to build on the existing strengths of the Village – which is welcoming, vibrant, and has a number of established early years programs and supports – and improve connectedness within the community to better support local families. Information sharing and community building are the key factors in this innovation. In the long-term, ideas to support Cumberland families under this initiative include: Presenting to and inviting engagement from municipal changemakers; building digital infrastructure for early years parents to propose ideas to and connect with community stakeholders; and developing a comprehensive Village Early Years Vision and shared plan involving ALL community members.

#### **Innovation 2: Create a Family Connector role for the South Comox Valley communities, with a focus on reaching families in the Royston, Union Bay and Fanny Bay areas.**

This rural outreach position focuses on relationship building within and among families in the community, in order to welcome and involve local families in events, programs, supports and connections. The Family Connector provides guidance and knowledge regarding available supports in the community, and will continue to learn what supports would best meet the needs of families in these rural areas. This role will aim to establish and build partnerships with local service organizations to improve connections between services and rural families.

## COURTENAY

The Courtenay neighbourhood is mostly centralized and more urban compared to the North and South Comox Valley communities. It includes the Courtenay downtown core, West Courtenay and the hospital district, as well as rural areas on the western border of town. Children who live in this neighbourhood attend Arden Elementary School, Courtenay Elementary School, Ecole Puntledge Park Elementary School, and Queneesh Elementary School.

### Summary of Courtenay research & community engagement

In 2020-2022, we completed the data collection and community engagement phase of our Courtenay social lab. While our primary focus was on the South Comox Valley between 2020 and 2021, in the process of expanding the project we also engaged with families from the other communities, including Courtenay (see Appendix B for timeline of engagement activities). In 2022, we continued our community engagement efforts in Courtenay and Comox (see below) to obtain additional insights from parents in each community. In line with the social innovation lab framework, we then analyzed and organized this data to better understand the current landscape of child-serving systems in the Courtenay community (see attached data maps, Appendix F).

#### We learned that:

The current system largely benefits those who are already connected within the community: those who feel connected and close to their neighbours report feeling less isolated, and parents and families who are already connected to resources and supports more easily seek and find new supports or information. For newcomer families, single-parent household families, culturally diverse families, or families whose children exhibit challenging behaviours, the difficulty to connect is often greater due to a variety of barriers (time, linguistic/cultural, financial, lack of adequate behavioural supports).

COVID-19 affected the concerns parents have regarding their own mental health as well as the mental health of their children; the lack of social opportunities and connections during the pandemic has increased fear of long-term impacts on the development of their children, and increased the need for more behavioural supports. Those families who feel isolated and/or do not have social support networks are at a greater disadvantage in this system.

The current system largely benefits those who have existing knowledge/information about resources within the community. Parents expressed the need for increased awareness about available resources within the community, and several noted that they rely on word of mouth for this information.

There are a number of pervasive institutional/structural factors that influence the current child-serving system in Courtenay, including the high cost of living, lack of affordable housing, and long waitlists for health services and assessments. These factors function in addition to the widely-reported need for affordable childcare.



## Summary of Courtenay innovation plan development

We hosted a joint, in-person workshop for the Courtenay and Comox communities to in order to develop innovations that would better support parents and families who live in these centralized areas.

Families using the early years services, resources, and infrastructure of Courtenay and Comox often go between both neighbourhoods, and yet these two communities have distinct characteristics and families report different experiences raising children in each community. Early years service providers also note the commonalities and differences across the two neighbourhoods. Furthermore, the supports and programs in Courtenay and Comox also serve families who live outside of these boundaries, so it was important to acknowledge the potentially centralized nature of any prospective innovations. Knowing the interconnectedness of these two areas, we chose to couple Courtenay and Comox in designing and developing potential innovations. Parents, caregivers, service providers, and local government representatives were invited to emerge innovations that would better support early years families in both areas.

At the Courtenay/Comox working session, we highlighted the key themes that potential innovations for Courtenay and Comox families should address. These were: a) supporting children to be socially comfortable and confident with the tools to manage anxiety and encourage healthy development, b) supporting parents to have deeper connections to manage stress and improve their well-being, c) improving families' access to supports and information, and d) encouraging and enhancing opportunities for connection within communities to all families in an inclusive and engaging way.

Separate conversations were held for Courtenay and Comox in order to explore potential innovations and discuss their desirability, feasibility, and viability. The following two innovations were selected for further development in Courtenay:

### **Innovation 1: Initiate and coordinate a weekly, full day drop-in "Neighborhood House Program," with low to no-cost childminding available for those who need it.**

To make this feasible, this innovation would require a space and a partnership with an organization who already operates existing infrastructure (for example, a recreation centre). A Neighborhood House program would act as a casual and safe connection point and play space for early years families. The additional feature of this program would be to have a rotating roster of service providers in attendance to increase their familiarity and accessibility to families.

### **Innovation 2: Improve access to and consistency of early years information.**

This innovation acknowledges that the Comox Valley has many resources and opportunities available to families, but that information about these resources/opportunities is needing more cohesion and widespread dissemination. To increase access to consistent information, efforts to bolster already existing platforms (mainly, [Valley Child](#)) will ensure that programs and resources are available in one centralized location (likely online). Furthermore, this centralized information would be widely shared with families through many common place community locations.

## COMOX

Like Courtenay, the Comox neighbourhood is mostly centralized and more urban compared to the North and South Comox Valley communities. It includes the Comox downtown core, areas of East Courtenay, the K'ómoks First Nation, and the Comox Peninsula. Children who live in this neighbourhood attend Aspen Park Elementary School, Brooklyn Elementary School, Ecole Robb Road Elementary School, and Valley View Elementary School.

## Summary of Comox research & community engagement

In 2020-2022, we completed the data collection and community engagement phase of our Comox social lab; this process happened in tandem with the engagement activities in Courtenay, with the specific focus on these two neighbourhoods occurring in 2022. Parent responses and ideas were always sorted and separated by the neighbourhood in which the parent/family lived. We then analyzed and organized the data to better understand the current landscape of child-serving systems in the Comox community (see attached data maps, Appendix D).

### We learned that:

The current system is more disadvantageous for parents/families without family nearby, who often report feeling isolated. Parents report struggling with daily stresses and express worry about how these stresses impact their parenting and decision-making. However, a number of people commented on how it is easy to meet other families with young children within their neighbourhoods, and that they are forming more connections among neighbours and through online community groups.

Comox has a number of well-attended and existing community supports and programs, and easy access to safe outdoor opportunities (parks, playgrounds, nature). The main disadvantage is for families seeking programs at different times of the day/week and for children under the age of 3.

COVID-19 created a number of complications and highlighted concerns for families, including the lack of social connections for children during key timepoints in development, with reports of greater separation anxiety in children. Regarding their children's social connections, some mentioned that their children's only source of social connection/interaction is with their own siblings.

Compared to the other 3 neighbourhoods, parents and families who live in Comox highlighted fewer of the institutional/structural factors within the current system that create barriers to supporting their children's wellbeing. The most frequently mentioned structural concern is the difficulty finding safe and affordable childcare.

### Summary of Comox innovation plan development

As described earlier in the Courtenay innovation plan development, we hosted a joint, in-person workshop for the Courtenay and Comox communities. Because of the centralized, interconnected nature of these two areas, we highlighted areas of overlap between the two communities and also discussed areas of divergence for innovation planning. Separate conversations were held for each community in order to explore potential innovations and discuss their desirability, feasibility, and viability.

Parents, caregivers, service providers and community stakeholders collaboratively identified a number of innovation ideas to pursue in the Comox area. The following two innovations were selected for further development in Comox:

#### **Innovation 1: Increase intergenerational connectedness.**

This innovation would be through hands-on, food-focused activities (growing, harvesting, preserving, meal prep, etc.) and would support residents at different life stages to learn practical skills and have fun! This would require the use of a centrally-located commercial kitchen where everyone, including children, would be comfortable and welcomed.

#### **Innovation 2: Host an accessible series of short workshops focused on topics parents have expressed interest in.**

Partnering with a local organization (for example, the regional library) to offer special interest workshops, tailored to families' needs, would benefit a wide range of families. By removing barriers (such as workshop length and cost) and tapping into the expressed interests of Comox parents, this innovation would support parents to: better manage their stress, access quality information and tools, and offer an opportunity to bond with other families through shared experiences and challenges.

## Where are we now?

## Where are we headed?



Since 2019, we have worked collaboratively with parents, service providers, early years professionals, and community members in several neighbourhoods in the Comox Valley to understand and improve the systems that support our local children. We began our efforts in the more rural neighbourhoods in the Valley, where connections and supports for parents are more limited, and moved to the more centralized neighbourhoods as the project progressed.

As outlined above, our work is a cycle of learning, planning, and implementation. We have learned an incredible amount of information about what is working for parents who are raising children in the Comox Valley, what barriers they experience, and what they envision a better system of supports could look like. We have implemented our innovation 'pilots' in two of our Comox Valley neighbourhoods, with two neighbourhoods well into in the innovation planning stages. Our work is only just beginning. The success of the **Building Connections** project hinges on the sustainability of the innovations we implement, and we have a vision of continuing this work in collaboration with our dedicated community partners.

The impact of each innovation plan will be evaluated using a developmental evaluation process created by the research team. Learnings from the ongoing evaluation will be integrated into the plan for that area and also considered for adaptation for each of the neighbouring areas.

Ultimately, we are looking to move the dial on our Early Development Instrument results over the coming rounds of data collection. The EDI is sensitive to a myriad of factors that impact children's development and while our social lab approach incorporates interventions across environments, we need to be cautious about predicting large-scale population change. Systems change is slow; we do not envision the innovations we develop to lead to quick fixes. Nonetheless, in time we expect this approach will lead to measurable change in child development outcomes across the community.



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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A**

[Neighbourhoods Map](#)

**Appendix B**

[Project Timeline](#)

**Appendix C**

[Parent & Caregiver Survey Questions](#)

**Appendix D**

[North Comox Valley Data Maps](#)

**Appendix E**

[South Comox Valley Data Maps](#)

**Appendix F**

[Courtenay Data Maps](#)

**Appendix G**

[Comox Data Maps](#)

**Appendix H**

[South Comox Valley Community Summary Reports](#)