

June 2020

HUMAN
EARLY LEARNING
PARTNERSHIP



BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR STRONG COMMUNITIES

Findings from 2019 Community Sessions

COMOX VALLEY ■



For additional information about the project, please contact:

Amanda Kwan, Research Assistant
Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP),
School of Population & Public Health, Faculty of Medicine
The University of British Columbia
amanda.kwan@ubc.ca | 604-827-3004

www.earlylearning.ubc.ca

Prepared by the UBC Community Systems Research Team:

Dr. Brenda T. Poon (Principal Investigator), Chris Atchison, Amanda Kwan, Campbell Veasey

Knowledge and ideas represented were generated from the 2019 Community Sessions.

We greatly appreciate the many contributions of our community collaborators including:

Allison Trumble
Amy Bauman
Andrew McKenzie
Betty Tate
Bunny Shannon
Caleigh Ellis
Carlene Steeves
Cheryl Jordan

Colleen Friendship
Gillian Normandin
Jacqueline Anderson
Jacquie Kinney
Jane Hughs
Jenny Nijhoff
Joanne Schroeder
Laurie Tulloch

Michelle Carty
Natalie Catto
Natalie Robinson
Peter Ashmore
Rebecca Kleinman
Sandra Allen
Stephanie McGowan

Also, a special thank you to our facilitators from Ready to Raise, Tracy Smyth & Tammy Dewar, and community partners, Joanne Schroeder and Colleen Friendship.

Introduction and Background

The ‘Building Partnerships for Strong Communities’ project started as a joint initiative focused on the systems supporting social-emotional well-being of young children in community. The overarching aim for this project was to facilitate the design of community-based strategies to support and promote the social-emotional well-being of young children and their families in two BC communities. Over the past several months, we have worked alongside community members to collect information that would address three central objectives.

Objective 1: Develop a better understanding of collective community perspectives on key issues within the system that influence children’s social-emotional well-being;

Objective 2: Develop a better understanding of existing community capacity to support children’s social-emotional well-being; and

Objective 3: Create a new and diverse network of academics, government, and community-based individuals and organizations who can work together to support actions towards promoting children’s social-emotional well-being.

Community Sessions

Community sessions took place over a 7-month period from May to November 2019. Session duration ranged from a half to full day of activities. During each session, team members (research/community) supported the co-production of knowledge by facilitating small group activities and recording observations and field notes. Between and post sessions the research team engaged in the synthesis and analysis of the knowledge generated from the community sessions.

Session #1 Introduction to Systems Thinking & Idea Generation: This first session was focused on introducing participants to Systems Thinking ideas/concepts and to brainstorm key issues that should be addressed during the early years (when children are 0-6) to promote social-emotional wellbeing in children and youth. Participants worked through a series of activities including community asset identification and sorting, variable generation (i.e., variables deemed to influence children’s social-emotional well-being in each community) and exploring interrelationships between variables (connection circles).

Session #2 Model Revision (causal loop diagram): This second session was focused on gathering in-depth input on and revising the outputs of Session #1. Integration of these outputs resulted in an initial group model of factors influencing children’s social-emotional well-being (causal loop diagram).

Session #3 Community Consultation: This final session aimed to engage a broader group from the community to provide feedback on the model generated in Sessions 1 and 2. The focus was on further revising and verifying the model (causal loop diagram) and engaging in structured discussion around action areas/items.

Research Approach

To address the three research objectives, a series of systems tools and approaches were used. These included, but were not limited to: 1) *concept mapping activities* to determine community priority areas and assess feasibility for actions; 2) *group model building* to create a working causal loop diagram grounded in community perspectives and experiences; and, 3) *sorting squares* to promote discussion around current social-emotional assets, collective next steps and areas for future research.

The community sessions engaged a broad group of community participants who were able to revise and verify outputs at various stages of the research process. Participants included individuals involved in supporting or caring for young children and families in the area of social-emotional development (e.g. academics, government personnel, community decision makers, community support personnel, service providers, early childhood educators, clinicians, parents/caregivers). A summary of community participants is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of community participants

Research Activity	Kamloops Participants (N)	Comox Valley Participants (N)	Total Participants (N)
Systems Thinking Worksheet & Network Survey	17	14	31
Concept Mapping Activities	-	-	31 brainstorming 15 sorting & rating
Group Model Building – Session #1	17	14	31
Group Model Building – Session #2	18	9	27
Group Model Building & Generating Actions – Session #3	12	15	27
Follow-up interviews	6	6	12

Project Findings

The following results represent the knowledge and ideas that emerged from a collection of community stories, experiences and perspectives.

What are key issues within the system that influence children’s social-emotional well-being?

Through the group model building process, community participants identified a range of key issues that influence the system of supports for families with young children in the Comox Valley. Collective creation of a causal loop diagram (CLD) enabled the participants to delve into the complexity of the system, with particular focus on a series of “cause and effect” pathways that connect variables across multiple systems levels.

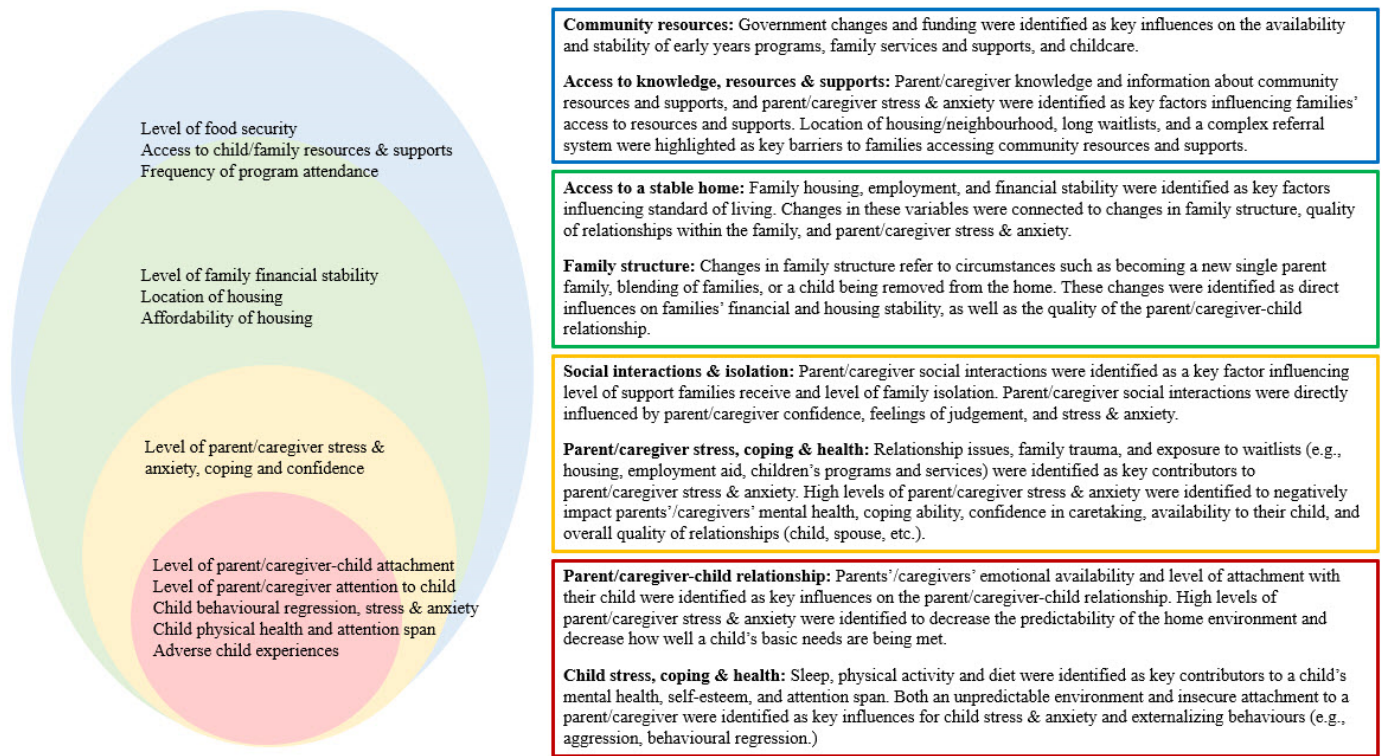
We encourage you to further explore the system of “cause and effect” pathways through the interactive model created. The following link provides access to the Comox Valley’s causal loop diagram: <https://kumu.io/catchiso/cld-site-2-combined-rev>

Through this collaborative model building process, a number of thematic areas emerged. These included: community resources; access to knowledge, resources and supports; access to a stable home, family structure, social interactions and isolation; parent/caregiver stress, coping and health; parent/caregiver-child relationship; and child stress, coping and health. Figure 1 on page 6 provides a short description of each theme and highlights the key variables, particularly those that were highly interconnected to other variables in the model.

The key thematic areas and variables within the CLD model span a wide range to include direct influences on children’s day-to-day lives (e.g., food security, parent/caregiver-child relationship and attachment) and also indirect influences that affect the people who care for and interact with them or the opportunities and environments they experience (e.g., access to family resources & supports, affordability of housing). The breadth of key issues show how influences on children’s social-emotional well-being are multi-level, interconnected and complex.

Although the CLD can be organized and understood according to these thematic areas, it is important to consider the various interacting mix of influences (direct and indirect) on children’s social-emotional well-being that cut across and span multiple themes, variables, and systems levels.

Figure 1: Ecological model of thematic areas and key variables influencing children’s social-emotional well-being in the Comox Valley



Priority issues

To complement the CLDs, we also asked community participants to engage in a group concept mapping activity, where participants were asked to identify and prioritize key issues influencing children’s social-emotional vulnerability. Participants identified a series of items that were then sorted into 7 clusters: intersectoral collaboration, community capacity, supportive social environment, supportive home environment, childcare, meeting families’ basic needs, and supports for parents/caregivers. Table 2 below provides the top-rated items within each cluster. Items were rated on a 5-point scale for both the priority of the issue (ranging from not at all important to very important) and the feasibility of the issue (ranging from not at all feasible to very feasible). On average, issues scored high on both rating scales, indicating that the community participants generally felt that the issues were both highly important and feasible to address.

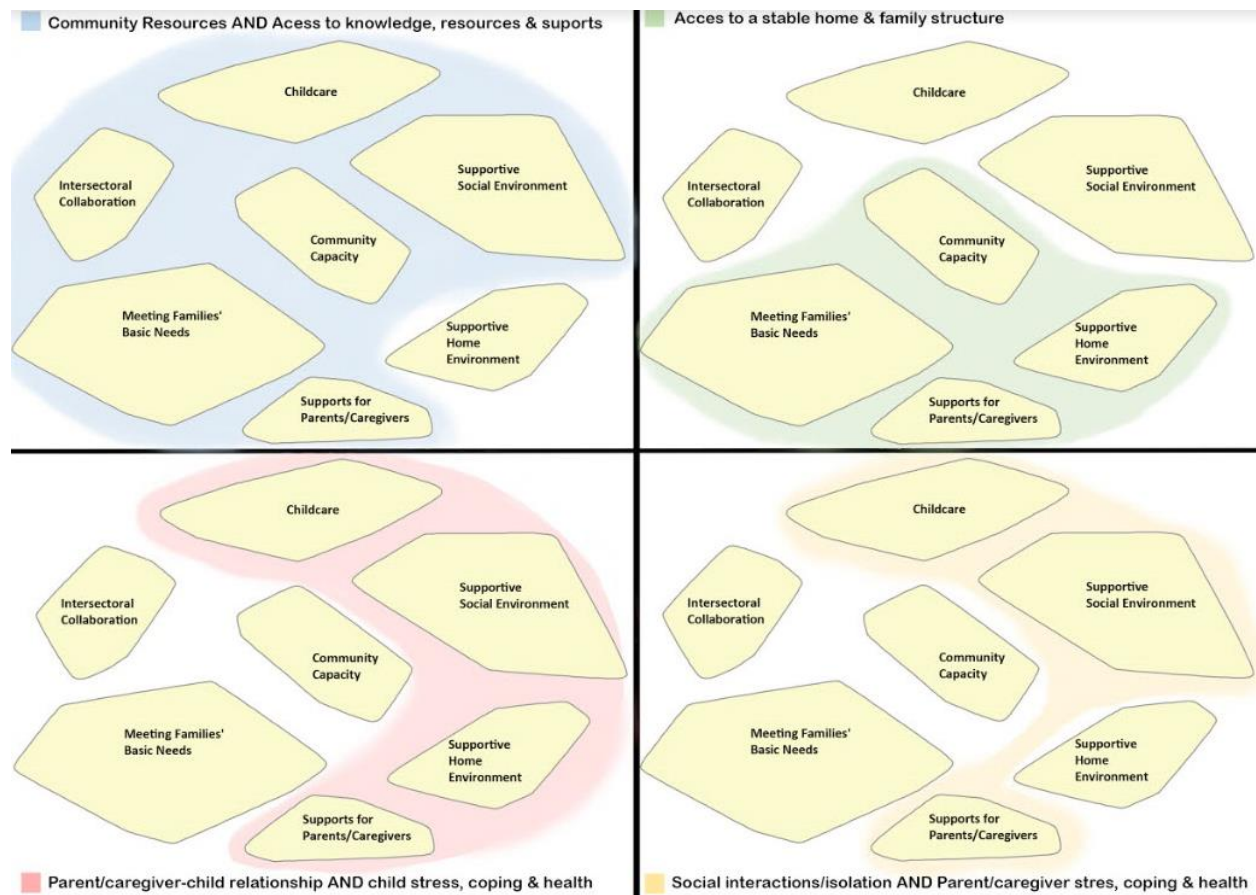
Table 2: Summary of clusters and their top-rated issues

Clusters	Top-rated Issues
Childcare	Access to high quality childcare Access to affordable childcare Providing positive childcare role models Providing supportive childcare settings
Supportive Social Environment	Providing nurturing environment for children Building child emotional literacy Listening to children Access to outdoor spaces
Meeting Families' Basic Needs	Family access to healthy food Access to stable housing Access to mental health supports
Community Capacity	Providing safe environments for children Context specific interventions for children Community understanding of impacts of trauma on children
Intersectoral Collaboration	Inter ministry cooperation (getting outside of the silos) Access to timely supports for educators to support children's social and emotional development Teaching social-emotional development to the first teachers of parents/caregivers (e.g., doula, nurses) Strong collaboration with mental health partners (infant and child)
Supports for Parents/Caregivers	Education for parents/caregivers on the importance of attachment Access to educational information right at birth (attachment, needs and social-emotional needs) Providing families/caregivers with support to enhance parenting skills that support their child's healthy social-emotional development Providing families/caregivers with support to enhance parenting skills that support their child's healthy social-emotional development
Supportive Home Environment	Showing respect towards the child Meeting children's basic needs Positive interactions with parents/caregivers

These community generated priority clusters represent many of the same ideas and issues that emerged from the CLD model. In fact, the themes from the CLD model can be mapped onto the priority clusters or the priority clusters directly mapped onto the CLD model. Figure 2 below illustrates this interconnected relationship by overlaying the thematic areas that emerged from the CLD onto the priority clusters.

It is important to recognize that a priority cluster may exist within a single thematic area or cut across multiple. For example, the cluster ‘childcare’ cuts across three themes (community resources; access to knowledge, resources & supports; and social interactions & isolation). This supports our understanding of the complexity of the system and the continued need to use systems thinking and tools to identify influential areas that support children’s social-emotional well-being.

Figure 2: Cluster map showing community priority clusters with CLD themes



What community supports were identified as key influences on children's social-emotional well-being in the Comox Valley?

To understand current community resources, we asked participants during Community Session #1 to complete both a brainstorming and sorting square activity, and network activity. Through these activities, we were able to compile a list of community assets targeted at the promotion of children's social-emotional well-being. This list of assets was then sorted according to impact on children's social-emotional well-being (high vs. low impact), and accessibility (accessible to many vs. accessible to few). Data collected from the network activity (survey) provided information about the different ways organizations are connected. For example, how organizations currently collaborate with one another. The network survey data collected represent the views of 7 different organizations within the Comox Valley. The results are described in detail below.

Current community assets

During community asset mapping in session #1, 14 participants brainstormed 14 assets (or ideas, organizations and services) that they felt had potential to promote children's social-emotional well-being within Comox Valley. Of these, 10 were existing assets, such as the Comox Valley Family Services Association and Aboriginal Head Start. Across all 10 assets, 43 programs and services exist to promote social-emotional well-being. Community members' contributions revealed a diverse set of programs with varying benefits; roughly two-thirds of all programs and services fell into seven categories: school programs, mental health, Indigenous-oriented programs, recreation, direct support (or donations and payments), nutrition, and development. Some assets related to high numbers of programs and services (CVCDA has 16 distinct programs), whereas others focused on one or two programs (such as Aboriginal Head Start).

The following list is not a comprehensive list of all current community assets. Rather, it represents the community supports identified as having a large social-emotional influence and being accessible to many:

Valley Dads

Summer pop-ups (e.g., families in the park)

Early childhood educators (ECEs)

Community websites (e.g., valleychild.ca)

Library (e.g., storytime)

Comox Valley Family Service Association (e.g. policies that work with food banks to bring food to families)

Kids sports programs

Interorganizational collaboration

The results of the network survey indicated that organizations/agencies/programs that provide community supports for families with young children often have working relationships with one another, such as through providing informal referrals or collaborating to provide diverse and accessible resources.

Organizations/agencies/programs that either self identified or were identified by members of the community as engaged in promoting healthy social-emotional well-being for children 0-6 years old were asked about their current levels of collaboration. A summary of these results is provided below:

- On average, organizations/agencies/programs collaborate with 5 other organizations/agencies/programs within the network that promotes children’s social-emotional well-being.
- There was general consensus that more collaboration would be beneficial to promoting children’s social-emotional development and overall well-being. Organizations/agencies/programs were not collaborating with most other organizations/agencies/programs. Time limitations were identified as a barrier for more frequent collaboration.
- There is a substantial amount of collaboration centered around certain organizations/agencies/programs. The Comox Valley Child Development Association, Comox Valley Family Services Association, PacificCARE and StrongStart were identified as central for collaboration.

What are ways that the Comox Valley can further support children’s social-emotional well-being?

Strategies for community action

Participants from Community Session #3 generated a list of action items that were both feasible and important for impacting children’s social-emotional well-being. Table 3 below highlights the resulting action items and where they map onto the priority clusters that emerged through concept mapping and also the thematic areas that emerged through the causal loop diagram.

The action ideas generated reinforce the complexity of the system and again highlight the importance of considering actions that have ripple effects across multiple levels of influence on children’s social-emotional well-being. Proposed actions span a wide range to include those that directly impact a child’s day-to-day (e.g., creating more playgrounds and child-friendly greenspaces) to those that indirectly impact a child by influencing the capacity of people who support them (e.g., increasing wages for ECE and support staff, providing fair living wages and guaranteed housing, and creating more mental health resources/supports for parents/caregivers).

Table 3: Community generated action ideas

CLD Themes	CM Clusters	Action Items
	Interorganizational Collaboration	1. Create an Early Years Act to protect the system against political changes
Community resources	Interorganizational Collaboration	2. Secure stable funding to support multi-disciplinary partners and connections between programs and providers
	Community Capacity	3. Increase ECE wages
	Community Capacity	4. Provide more professional development opportunities for service providers
	Childcare	5. Create more playgrounds and greenspaces for children 6. Create more community gardens (e.g., one at every school)
		7. Increase the availability and access of community resources, supports and programs 8. Increase childcare spaces 9. Universal childcare
Access to a stable home environment	Meeting Families' Basic Needs	10. Create shared and multi-generational housing options for families 11. Guaranteed income (fair living wages) 12. Guaranteed public housing 13. Continued work on food security
Access to knowledge, resources & supports	Supports for Parents/Caregivers	14. Create technologies/apps that provide families with knowledge on mental health, trauma, and community resources
Social interactions and isolation	Supportive Home Environment	15. Create connections across the community to engage families and decrease isolation 16. Provide a wider range of social opportunities for families
Parent/caregiver stress, coping, and health	Supports for Parents/Caregivers, Meeting Families' Basic Needs, Community Capacity	17. Create more affordable and accessible mental health options for parents/caregivers 18. Create a protocol where mental health check-ins (touchpoints) with parents/caregivers are routine within early years programs and services

Community hopes and fears

Generally, participants expected that the Comox Valley would see positive change and improvements in children's social-emotional well-being in the year to come. All participating organizations felt some level of capacity to promote positive change in the community. When asked about their hopes and fears for the future, participants identified *healthy attachment (parent/caregiver-child)*, *access to child supports*, and *access to greenspace* as areas they were most hopeful for. *Amount of parent/caregiver stress* and *family health (mental & physical)* were identified as areas that evoked the most concern.

Where next for the project?

Continuing collaborative partnerships

As this stage of the 'Building Partnerships for Strong Communities' project comes to a close, we are looking to continue our collaborative partnerships with the many people and organizations in the Comox Valley. This process has provided information that we hope will help to continue and build momentum for community planning and action. Drawing from the data we co-produced with both our partnering communities, we have and will continue to apply for further funding that supports our continued work towards promoting the social-emotional well-being of young children and their families in BC communities. Please stay tuned! We look forward to our next opportunities to work together again.