



**THE BUILDING CONNECTIONS
FOR VALLEY FAMILIES PROJECT**

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

Neighbourhood-Level Innovations Report

MARCH 31 2023



We are deeply grateful to the Comox Valley Community Foundation, the Comox Valley Regional District, and Island Health for funding that made these innovations possible.



The work of the Building Connections Project has taken place on the traditional unceded territories of the K'ómoks First Nation, the traditional keepers of this land. The project team and steering committee recognize the many harms done to indigenous children, families and people through a long history of colonialism in British Columbia and beyond. We are committed to putting in the time and work to aid in this journey of reconciliation.

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Introduction

Vision

The *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 (0-8) in the Comox Valley. 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. In doing so, we hope to support families with young children in finding play and learning opportunities and in building social connections within their communities.

Background

The *Building Connections Project* was initially funded by an *Island Health Community Wellness Grant* (2019-2021). Subsequently, *Connections* received a grant from the *Comox Valley Community Foundation* (CVCF) 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). More detailed information about the background and methodological research process of this project can be found in the complementary research report titled "*Building Connections for Valley Families: A Social Innovation Lab to Improve the Systems that Support Childhood Wellbeing in the Comox Valley*."

The *Building Connections Project* has carefully considered a multiplicity of voices that contribute to early childhood experiences. Notably, parents, caregivers, and those central to creating healthy environments for children, have been critical participants in both informing and guiding the local level change that *Connections* aims to support.

In addition to considering multiple voices, the *Connections Project* has paid attention to how the experiences of children and families differ according to their regional context. Following extensive data collection from parents and consultation with community stakeholders, *Connections* held working sessions to explore and expand on the challenges identified by early years families. These working sessions have been key to initiating the neighborhood level innovations that are now being implemented in various areas of the Comox Valley.

This neighborhood-specific focus has ensured that the innovations chosen are specific to the unique strengths, needs, and characteristics of each region. Just as each area in the Comox Valley is distinctly different, implementation of these innovations has differed in terms of:

- Timeline that is conducive to effective partnerships within each community.
- Infrastructure availability and community resources.
- Level of community stakeholder engagement.
- Neighborhood-specific wants, needs, and ideas for strengthening early years opportunities.

Accountability to Community

A key part of the process of implementing these innovations was establishing continuous engagement within the community. In addition to feedback from families, this happened in three primary ways:

- 1 Monthly meetings within the *Connections* staff and project leaders to discuss challenges, ideas, and adaptations related to the way innovations are playing out within the communities.
- 2 Bimonthly updates to the [Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative](#), the collective that initiated the *Connections Project*.
- 3 Bimonthly updates, feedback, and guidance from the *Building Connections* Steering Committee, a group composed of a variety of skilled professionals and community members, representing various organizations with family and/or early years mandates.

Those who filled the roles of the Family Connectors (whose roles are more fully described within this report) were personally anchored within the communities. This not only ensured a deeper level of community connection and accountability to the work being done, but also contributed to the level of neighborhood knowledge and awareness.

This report describes the neighborhood level innovations that emerged from the *Connections Project* research. The efforts described in this report detail the process of ongoing family and community engagement and offer an overview of the innovations developed in North and South Courtenay areas. The neighbourhood innovations in Courtenay and Comox are currently being developed.

March 2023 marks the conclusion of CVCF funding. Nearly two years of successful pilot programming has been completed in the NCV neighborhoods. In the South Comox Valley region, innovations are in the initial stages of implementation (first three months). As of April 2023, *Connections* is in the process of seeking long term stewardship under an early years-oriented host organization.

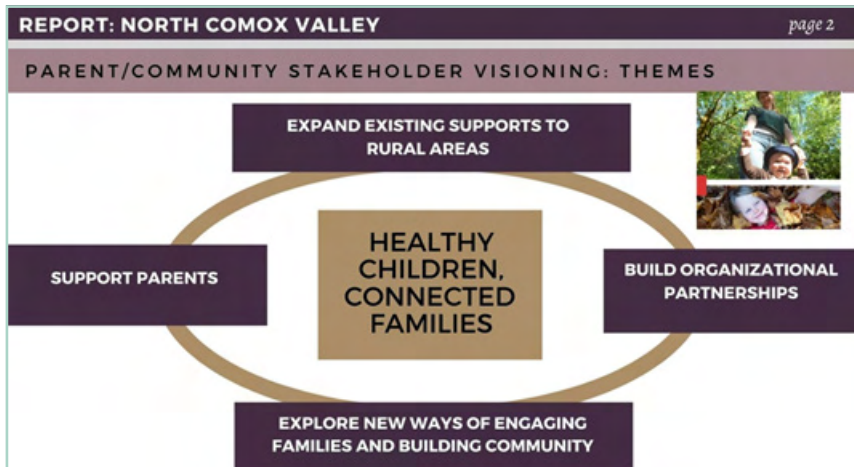
This transition (including securing additional funding and establishing a cohesive plan to carry this project forward) will need both adaptability and a commitment to the projects' roots.



North Comox Valley Innovations

Preamble

Parents and community stakeholders were integral to informing what the rural areas of the North Comox Valley area need to support healthy children and connected families. Ongoing community engagement and working sessions have indicated how early years families want and need to be supported.



From the North Comox Valley Innovation Report, 2021.
www.cveyc.ca/north-comox-valley

Since September 2021, the *Building Connections Project* has been busy supporting two innovations to address these support needs in the North Comox Valley area:

- 1 Drop-in programs or 'connection points' which provide localized space for rural families to connect and play, and
- 2 A 'Family Connector', who attends, supports, and promotes these drop-in programs.

Together, these two innovations aimed to:

- A Provide rural families with increased means of connecting with each other and with resources/supports, and
- B Offer a skilled, consistent presence focused on welcoming and encouraging local families participation in the direction and content of the programs.

These goals are part of *Connections'* overall aim of addressing childhood vulnerability for the area¹ by enriching learning and play opportunities for early years families. These innovations have been (and continue to be) bolstered by the input of caregivers, service providers, and community organizations.

The last two year of this project's active involvement in the North Comox Valley (NCV) neighborhoods have looked slightly different. **YEAR ONE** of innovations saw three programs piloted. **YEAR TWO** saw a continuation of two of these three drop-in programs, as well as continued efforts to establish innovations in a NCV area where establishing partnerships have been historically difficult. In this report, the continued and growing community partnerships that contribute to this project's success will be outlined and the highlights and future steps of these programs will be explored.

¹ These vulnerability numbers are based on reporting from the University of British Columbia's Human Early Learning Partnership, specifically the [Early Development Instrument](#) results from the school catchment areas of the North Comox Valley.

Innovation One: Drop-In Programs or ‘Connections Points’

Rationale for Drop-In Programs

Drop-in programs are attractive to parents and caregivers in the North Comox Valley area for many reasons. The rural neighborhoods in this region can be particularly geographically isolating. This challenge continues to be highlighted by parents, especially those who are new to the community.

Isolation is compounded by the fact that:

- Family programs are primarily anchored in the central areas of Courtenay and Comox,
- There are few playgrounds in the North Comox Valley for families to congregate, and
- Residences are often spaced out and rural areas have minimal infrastructure (i.e., side walks) to spontaneously meet others living nearby.

Not only are families separated socially, but on a service level as well. To continue to address these barriers, *Connections* put efforts into supporting early years opportunities in the three NCV school catchment areas: Miracle Beach Elementary, Huband Park Elementary, and Airport Elementary.

Key Qualities of Drop-In Programs

Based on parent input, the drop-in programs developed were planned to be important connection points to parents.

It was important that these connections points be:

- Anchored within families’ neighborhoods to foster easier connections for families, both within and outside program times,
- A space for families to gather informally. Minimal structure helps parents/children who are anxious about conforming to program structure,

As low barrier as possible:

- Programs are free, drop-in, and no pre-registration is required.
- Snacks for children and warm drinks for adults are offered.
- Being close to home, transportation challenges are reduced.





Miracle Beach Catchment



Innovation Two: Family Connector

Rationale for the Family Connector

The Family Connector acts as a consistent, knowledgeable and trusted presence across all North Comox Valley drop-in programs. Due to the physical and social isolation facing rural families, it was identified that stronger connections with service providers and supports might be beneficial to NCV families. A key priority for the Family Connector role was to encourage service providers to mobilize their offerings, and gain trust from parents and caregivers by reaching them in their own neighbourhoods. In addition to bridging the gap between parents and more formal supports, the Family Connector plays an integral role in creating a warm, welcoming environment. Building relationships with families allows the Family Connector to play an intermediary role in connecting like-minded families with each other.

Key Qualities of the Family Connector Position

The roles and responsibilities of the Family Connector are to be present at the drop-in program and bring their strong relational skills to the community.

In this role, the Family Connector:

- Welcomes families and looks for further ways to introduce/connect children and adults,
- Acts as a listening ear to parenting and home life challenges, continuously looking for ways to adapt the drop-in groups to meet families' wants, needs, and interests, and
- Provides a link between family services & resources, invited guest speakers based on information interests or gaps, and referred if necessary.

YEAR 1

Miracle Beach Catchment: Parent and Peanut

Connections partnered with the [Black Creek Community Association](#) (BCCA) to enrich Parent and Peanut, their parent and tot drop-in group, supported through the Ministry of Children and Family Development. This program has been in operation for excess of thirty years in the Black Creek Community. However, there continues to be families with young children in the Miracle Beach catchment area who are not accessing this or any other community programs.

To address this, *Connections* advocated for extending the hours of the program to improve accessibility and flexibility for families. Connections also broadened the advertisement of the program and focussed on ensuring the program was highly welcoming. It is supported by a Facilitator so with the addition of the Family Connector there are two consistent adults at the group and runs one day a week from 9:30 AM – Noon.

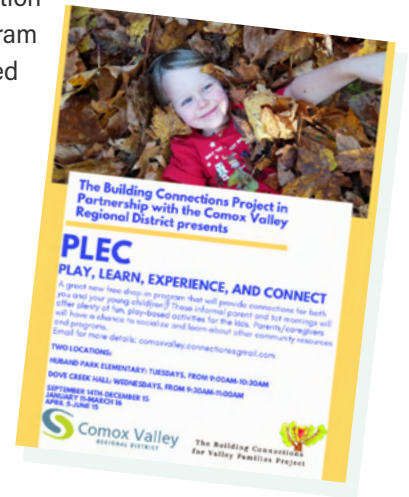




Huband Park Catchment: Play, Learn, Experience, and Connect (PLEC)

Connections supported PLEC in partnership with the [Comox Valley Regional District \(CVRD\) Recreation Department](#). CVRD provided the staff time for program facilitation as well as promotional support. The *Connections Project* provided funds for program supplies and the position of the Family Connector. PLEC programs were developed to serve the Huband Park School Catchment area and were run for an hour and a half weekly at two locations: 1) at Huband Park Elementary School, and 2) at the Dove Creek Hall.

The ongoing challenges of COVID affected many in-person programs. Piloting these innovations during a pandemic era posed many challenges and uncertainties, but also offered a critical climate to meet some very salient needs. These innovations were able to provide consistent and welcoming opportunities for families to connect with others in their community. The free, drop-in nature of the programs complimented the fluctuating surges and regulations associated with COVID, giving families a program to attend when able and comfortable to do so. The attendance and reactions to the programs indicated that these innovations were very welcomed additions to the neighborhoods.



Family Trails

Connections partnered with the CVRD to promote a Family Trails Walking Series. The Family Trails initiative was developed in response to NCV families' concerns around the pandemic and to address their desires to spend time outdoors. Family Trails provided options to socialize in outdoor spaces, thereby addressing the safety concerns of some parents who did not feel comfortable indoors and/or who could not participate in regular programs due to vaccine mandates.

Family Trails provided free opportunities for families with young children to meet and enjoy regular outings in CVRD parks.

Two types of park outings were offered from mid-December (2021) to the end of May (2022):

- 1** The "Park Mob" walks advertised a time and a place to help coordinate accessible and self-directed weekly family walks, and
- 2** The "Naturalist Guided Walks" occurred monthly and provided more structured, guided weekend outings.

Workshops

In response to challenges shared by parents with the Family Connector, *Connections* supported several free workshops that aimed to provide learning and support opportunities for parents. [Mamatoto counselling](#) provided three evening conversation circles. This series was not well-attended, perhaps due to the "zoom fatigue" that many experienced during the pandemic. In addition, [JHMJ Coaching and Consulting](#) provided an online information session (titled Autism in the Early Years).



Miracle Beach Catchment



YEAR 2

Miracle Beach Catchment: Parent and Peanut

Connections continued its partnership with the Black Creek Community Association to enrich the Parent and Peanut program. The drop-in facilitator continued to be a consistent presence at this playgroup and works in partnership with the Family Connector to maintain and enhance the program.

Aside from various visits from guest speakers and library circle times, the group runs in an unstructured manner. Many who attended Parent and Peanut the previous year continued to attend. The program also saw an influx of new families. Commonly, families use this group as a location to arrange future meetups or plan social visits outside of the program.

Huband Elementary Catchment: The Dove Creek Hall Playgroup

What was last year known as the PLEC Program, is now known as the Dove Creek Hall Playgroup. While the relationship with CVRD continues to be positive and supportive, CVRD's staff shortages required Connections to seek alternative support for the facilitation role of this program. The Parent and Peanut drop-in Facilitator began facilitation of this group also, resulting in two consistent adults (facilitator and Family Connector) at both NCV drop-in programs.

Many families who attended PLEC last year, continue to attend this years' program. In addition, the Dove Creek Hall Playgroup drew attendance from families living in other Comox Valley neighborhoods, including: Comox, Courtenay, and Cumberland.

The Hall's Board of Directors, noting increased family use of the Hall over the past year, initiated the construction of a walking trail behind the hall. This trail greatly enriched the hall grounds and has already been used by the playgroup for several story walks. The trail is a very positive addition for families wanting to connect outdoors.



Airport Elementary Catchment:

Currently, a physical space and partnership in the Airport School catchment is still being established. Developing stronger, more consistent, and inclusive supports for early years families in this area has been challenging. However, positive momentum has slowly been building.

To assist in connecting families, a morning pop-up event was scheduled for September 2022. Airport Elementary was supportive in providing their new outdoor classroom as a venue and a children's story time circle (offered by the [Vancouver Island Regional Library](#)) was scheduled as an additional draw. The event was timed to fit into the school's recess schedule, with coffee and snacks provided. Attendance, however, was lower than hoped.

Recognizing the benefit of broader community integration, the Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) has informally agreed to partner with Connections for a parent-involved early years group. If this group transpires as discussed, it would be open to military and civilian families alike and would be supported by both Connections and MFRC staff. Future discussions to plan for the group are scheduled for spring 2023. Given the sizeable military population in the airport catchment, and the fact that MFRC is very keen on a partnership, we are optimistic that a collaborative early years program between MRFC and Connections will come to fruition. In the meantime, efforts will be made to plan several more outdoor pop-ups as the weather improves.





Summer Pop ups

For two consecutive summers, Connections has offered a “Teddy Bear Picnics” series in various locations in the NCV region. The summer pop ups were meant to:

- 1 Adapt to the lack of regularity that often defines the summer months,
- 2 Provide a summer connection point for families to gather, and
- 3 Promote early years services and engage with others in a low-pressure environment.

At the events, families enjoyed several open-ended family/child friendly activities. Connections staff and project leaders distributed and collected surveys filled by parents/caregivers as a means of acquiring further information about what strengths and barriers were salient to local parenting experiences.

The summer events were very well attended and supported by the broader community, attracting regular drop-in program participants as well as new parents and caregivers.



Summer 2022 Pop Ups

Location→	Gardens on Anderton	Dove Creek Hall	Black Creek Community Association
Date	July 12	July 20	July 28th
Time	10:30am—1pm	9:30am—12pm	9:30am—12pm
Attendance	29 families (33 parents/caregivers, 48 children). Garden staff estimated 100+	18 families (19 parents/caregivers; 38 children)	20 families (21 parents/caregivers; 33 children)
* Actual attendance estimated to be higher.			





Innovation Highlights

Community Guests and Special Events

Through regular conversation and email correspondence, the Family Connector encouraged parents to offer their input and ideas about how to amplify and give input into the direction of these programs. Frequently, parents would discuss aspects of parenting that they found challenging. As well as providing a listening ear, the Family Connector responded to parents input by inviting guest speakers to offer information and resources to the group.

Over the past two years of programming, the following guests and service providers were welcomed: [Comox Valley Child Development Association \(CVCDA\)](#), [Sasamans Society](#), a Car Seat Technician, the Comox Valley Toy Library Society, [Little Kickers Soccer](#), Cumby Kids Co-op, Community Dental Hygienist from VIHA, [Community Dieticians](#) from VIHA, a music teacher, a music therapist, [Family Sleep Specialist](#), a financial advisor, PacificCARE Child Care Resource and Referral, a [Speech and Language Pathologist](#), [Early Years Wellness Program](#), and the [Vancouver Island Regional Library](#).

The following events were a result of parent/caregiver led ideas: Clothing and toy swap, book swap, a playdough potluck, pyjama day, halloween potluck and costume parade, and a first-aid course (shortened, accessible and with children welcome).

Attendance Summary of Programs (September 2022 to March 2023)

Program	Total # families attending	# new families (previous year)	Average # per session		Age Range
			Families (previous year)	Children (previous year)	
Dove Creek Hall Playgroup	29	25 (23)	6.64 (3.28)	9.48 (5.06)	2 months to 5 years
Parent and Peanut	74	48 (58)	15.19 (9.78)	20.85 (12.59)	3 weeks to 5 years

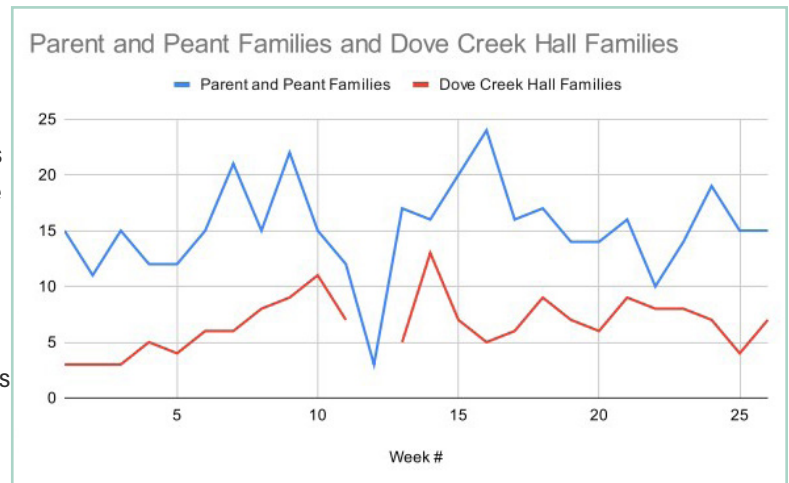
"I really notice that the tone that is set here, really encourages people to be kind and open to each other."

"I think [my son] basically learned how to walk here, just by watching the other kids. This is definitely his highlight of the week. Which means it's mine too!"

Family Connector Observations

Consistently, many of those attending these programs have commented on enjoying the easy drop-in nature of the program with no pre-registration requirements. Although guest speakers are often well-received, attendees tend to value the social, relational aspects of the groups more than the formalized information shared at these groups. Meeting other like-minded parents, providing their child with an opportunity to play with others, and receiving mutual support and validation from others continue to be the primary motive for parents/caregivers to attend.

Program Attendance Chart from September 15, 2022 to March 31, 2023



Parent/Caregiver Quotes

The perspective of parents tells a complete story about the quality of connection that these groups are providing. Below are a few quotes from the many parents and caregivers who benefit from these playgroups.

"Parent and Peanut is such a supportive, friendly place to connect with other parents, while your kids enjoy playing with their choice of toys. [The staff] do a beautiful job connecting with families as soon as they enter. They learn everyone's name and I can see the impact that has on making each person feel comfortable and welcome. I have been to parent groups that have not felt welcoming. I have been coming for 6-7 months now and have made several friends that I see outside of Parent and Peanut. I really value having a program like this that is in Black Creek and filled with other mamas from Black Creek that are even living in my neighbourhood. I may not have met them otherwise."

"I think what you are doing is just so great. I like coming and I see it with the other moms who come too. You check in with them, ask how their day is. You care about how they are doing and it's just so easy for people to drop-in. Remember the mom who came in the other week for the last 20 minutes? I thought that was so nice for her to be able to do that because of the easy nature of the program...If [people] want to chat, they can chat; if they want to sit back while their kids play, that's okay too. I wouldn't change anything about it—the minimal structure is how it should be."

"We moved here last year. We are getting out more this fall than last fall now that things are better with covid. We have tried Strong Starts and they're great. One thing is though—which has stopped us from going so much-- is that they are so busy. With so many people moving here, Strong Starts are so full. Even if we can get a spot...the noise makes me stop at the door and not want to go in. We wanted to find something quieter, and this is perfect."

“What a fun group! This is just so wonderful for the kids to come together and play. And you know what? It is probably just as good for the parents as it is for the kids. They all really need it.”

“[My son] is so shy and coming here has really helped him. He is slowly coming out of his shell. Even though some people think he’s too clingy, I can see that he really likes being around other kids. He doesn’t play with them, but he watches them and learns from just being in their space.”

Next Steps

As we continue to bolster the support in the NCV region, *Connections* intends to:

- Continue 'connection points' through the supported programs at the Dove Creek Hall and the Black Creek Community Association.
- Continue exploring possibilities in the Airport Elementary catchment area.
- Continue the Family Connector role into the spring and summer, 2023.
- Continue to monitor, evaluate, and adapt programs based on parent/community feedback.
- Continue considering how to engage with families who are hard to reach and who have barriers to overcome (for example, transportation barriers")
- Work towards better incorporating an Indigenous lens to programming.

Summary

Over the past two years, these supported programs offered parents and their children a regular, friendly, and informal place to connect, socialize, and share experiences with others, while also providing a way to access information about formalized supports and services. The Family Connector aimed to ensure a welcoming, consistent presence at these programs and to ensure opportunity for parent/caregiver voice and leadership in how these programs were executed.

The Dove Creek Hall Playgroup and Parent and Peanut continue to flourish as two very successful early years programs. These innovations enriched neighborhood programs/connection points, and offered a consistent Family Connector who provided fun, low-barrier and welcoming opportunities for families to connect and play with others in their community. The successful attendance and positive reactions to these community programs indicated that these innovations continue to be welcomed additions to the neighborhoods where they are rooted.



“What has been happening at Parent and Peanut since [Connections] became involved—I just have to say, it is an absolute game changer for all of us moms in Black Creek. The friends I have with kids are all people I have met at this group. We can count on seeing each other once a week at Parent and Peanut, which is so easy. But we are also now organizing get togethers outside of the group as well—with the kids and without. I really don’t think that type of community between us would have happened without the tone that is set here. It is so easy to just be here and know you are going to be welcomed and accepted.”

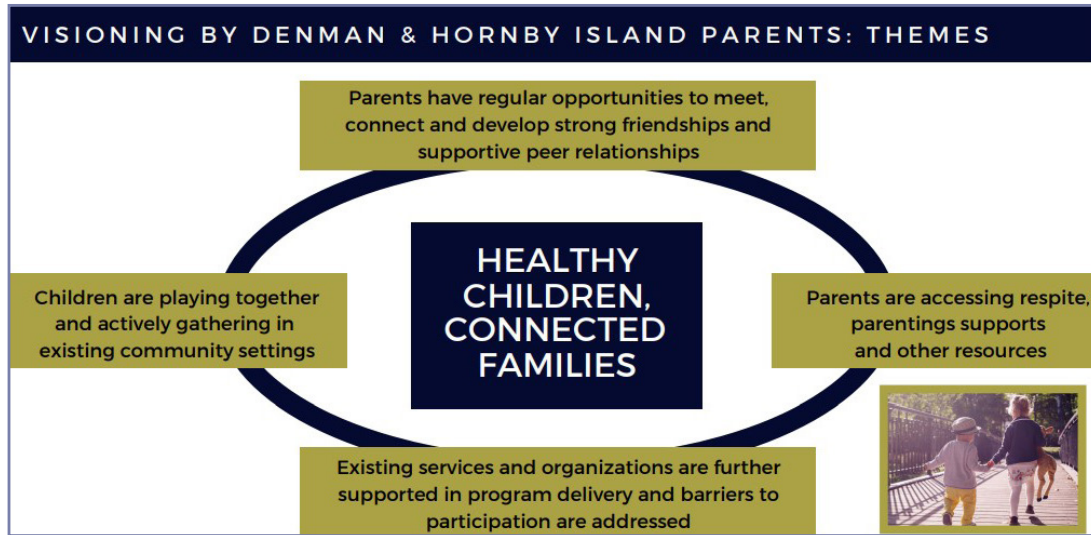
South Comox Valley Innovations

Preamble

During the South Comox Valley community engagement and data collection phase of the *Connections Project*, it became obvious that families in Union Bay, Fanny Bay and Royston have a distinct experience from those living in Cumberland. Similarly, Denman and Hornby families had an understandably unique experience from the other families' in the other South Comox Valley areas. At this stage of the project, the South Comox Valley was further separated into three "neighbourhoods" for Innovation development. They are reported separately below.

South Comox Valley Area 1: Denman Island and Hornby Island

Through conversation circles with parents and engagement with the community, it was learned that Denman and Hornby Island demonstrate strong community capacity to support early years families.



From the Denman and Hornby Summary Report, 2022 www.cveyc.ca/denman-hornby

Some of the many strengths of these communities are:

- Identified cohesion in communities, often noted as warm and welcoming.
- Strong network of community resources, services and programs.
- Good preschool/daycares and community schools on each Island.
- Strong network of seniors and intergenerational possibilities.
- Existence of community spaces and activity centres.
- History of highly valued community events.

The resilient capacity of Denman and Hornby is evident in how challenges are addressed and how existing supports and services collaborate to create opportunities for families. The communities have built a foundation on which to address the challenges identified by parents.

Overall, Denman and Hornby are great examples of communities that create an environment for healthy children and connected families. With these learnings, *Connections* made the decision to focus its innovation efforts in the other South Comox Valley neighbourhoods.





South Comox Valley Area 2: Union Bay, Fanny Bay, and Royston

Preamble

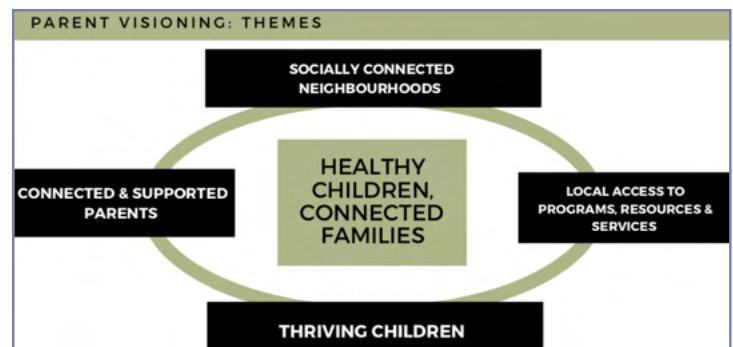
Union Bay and Fanny Bay lack year-round meeting places and programs integral to creating early years community support. This means families wanting to participate in early years programs need to access available programs in Royston and Cumberland, or travel further into Courtenay and Comox. Just as in the NCV area, the geographic barrier this puts on families can be isolating and travelling to other neighbourhoods for programming doesn't tend to support connections between families within a neighbourhood.

Connections identified three important innovation themes for Royston/Union Bay/Fanny Bay families.

They are:

- Increased community gatherings opportunities,
- Increased outreach, and
- More community infrastructure & support for rural halls.

Under these themes, the parent-driven priorities were to: increase early years offerings, support neighbourhood block parties, and hire a Family Connector for both peer-to-peer and community hall relationship building.



From the Royston/Union Bay/Fanny Bay Summary Report, 2022 www.cveyc.ca/south-comox-valley

Innovation: Family Connector

The initial focus of the South Comox Valley Family Connector was to organize two family-friendly drop-ins at the local community halls. The underlying goal was to support community engagement with parents, caregivers and rural hall stakeholders.

The drop-in events were held in Fanny Bay and Union Bay. These events were a collaborative effort between the *Connections Project* and Healthy Families (Comox Valley Family Services Association).

Goals for the events included:

- Providing fun events to gather SCV families,
- Connecting families with families,
- Modelling how Community Halls are important connection points for early years families,
- Gathering additional information from SCV families about their specific needs,
- Connecting and educating families about resources they may not know about, and
- Building awareness and excitement in the SCV about the *Building Connections* project.



These events served as an opportunity to meet new families that had recently moved to the area and connect them to existing early years services in the Comox Valley. Beyond this, the events were an opportunity to gather parent/caregiver input on what future programming they saw as most important.

Event Planning & Attendance

Location	Fanny Bay Community Hall	Union Bay Community Hall
Name	Connect & Play	Connect Play & Learn
Date	Friday March 3rd, 2023	Saturday March 11th, 2023
Attendance	24 participants (12 parents/caregivers/ grandparents, 12 children)	40 participants (22 parents/caregivers/ grandparents, 18 children)

The events were intentionally scheduled to be held on both a weekday and weekend day. This encouraged equitable opportunity for both working parents and home-based parents to attend. Events were minimally structured with opportunities for free play, visiting with others, art, sensory activities and snacking.

Each event's layout was thoughtfully considered to allow the organizers to greet and welcome arriving families and enable families and children to move freely within the space. Breakfast snacks were offered alongside coffee, tea, and juice.

Not requiring pre-registration meant attendance was difficult to predict but allowed these events to be as welcoming, low barrier, and flexible as possible for local families.





Innovation Highlights

Connect & Play Event - Fanny Bay

The Fanny Bay Community Hall was welcoming and encouraged *Connections* to utilize the hall for future programs at minimal to no cost. The attendance of this event was larger than expected with five families from the Fanny Bay area, two Union Bay families, two Cumberland families and one family from as far as Merville. Families who lived nearby were enthusiastic about future, similar opportunities. Comments about the Fanny Bay area being particularly prone to isolation were prominent amongst participating parents.

Connect, Play & Learn Event - Union Bay

The Union Bay event was very well attended; seven Union Bay families, two families from Royston, three from Courtenay, one family from Cumberland and one from Buckley Bay. Children ranged from 1 to 7 years of age and many attendees joined as a whole family, with their child(ren), and partner/spouse. Notably, the event welcomed a few grandparents (with grandchildren) from the community as well. Families were excited to see this type of drop-in event based in this community and expressed enthusiasm for similar opportunities in the near future. At this event, the *Connections Project* was able to collect more specific data to aid in the development of a SCV-based early years drop-in program.

These events provided a first opportunity to attend an early years program for some families new to the Fanny Bay area. Professionals from the early years community were able to provide both a listening ear to parents and help direct them to resources that could be helpful.

Providing casual, early years focused events in communities that currently have no programming was a highlight for the both of the organizing partners. There were no expectations for attendance but both *Connections* and *Healthy Families* were pleasantly surprised with the fantastic turnout.

Parent Quotes

"This is our first (daughter 9 months). You spend all the time getting ready to leave and then your child hates being stuck in a car seat for the drive into town and back. It's a big effort. Something closer would help the transportation part and help to check in with local parents that you maybe don't interact with otherwise."

"Our 3-year-old gets car sick, it's really made car travel different for us. Something closer to home would be ideal and cut down on time preparing her for a successful car ride."



Summary

These two pop-up events were a success. Together they met the goals established by event partners, Healthy Families and *Connections*. The South Comox Valley Family Connector, in partnership with other stakeholders created two fun, multi-activity drop-in events that attracted local Royston, Union Bay and Fanny Bay families as well as families from further afield. Parents were excited at the potential to see more early years offerings in their community. Attendance was larger than anticipated for first-time events. **Fanny Bay with 10 families** and **Union Bay with 14 families**, as well as a couple of grandparents at each event!

The Community Halls and local businesses that supported these offerings through providing space and promoting events was encouraging. Fanny Bay Hall is especially open to providing the hall space for a regular program.

In addition to the positive response to these events, *Connections* was able to gather contact information from more local families. This will assist the project team to gather more parent input about their evolving needs and wants.

Next Steps

The great attendance of these two pop up events indicates the need for continued early years programs for both Union Bay and Fanny Bay areas. It takes time to see consistent attendance to new programs. Alternating drop-in early years programs between the two communities may help to further explore the individual needs of families in both Union Bay and Fanny Bay.

Next steps as *Connections* proceeds in supporting families in the SCV are:

- Hosting several more pop-up events to bolster community relationships between UB and FB.
- Supporting a community member to lead a small group hobby night.
- Creating a step-by-step process to hosting a block party and or producing a block party sign out kit to encourage neighbourhood engagement.

There has already been discussion on potential partnerships with established community organizations and these are showing promising future possibilities. Already in progress is a community-driven application for a new playground to be built at Union Bay Community Hall. This new build would be a great starting point to host outdoor meet-ups and/or a nature based program.

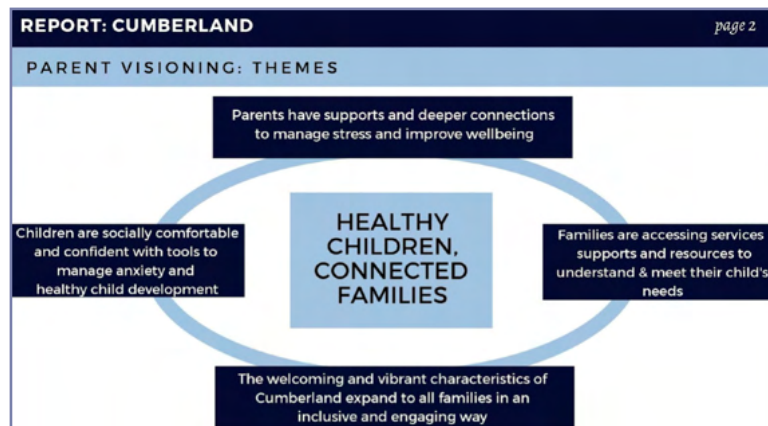
Starting with any one innovation can be a strong foundation to spark more parent-driven ideas and involvement.

There is so much potential in these communities to build thriving supports for early years children and families.

South Comox Valley Area 3: Cumberland

Preamble

Similar to North Comox Valley and Union Bay, Fanny Bay and Royston, community engagement and working sessions have pointed to how early years families want and need to be supported in Cumberland.



From Cumberland Summary Report, 2022 www.cveyc.ca/south-comox-valley

Innovation: Cumberland Early Years Collaborative

The logical first step Connections took was to support and facilitate Cumberland stakeholders and parents/families to have more opportunities in community to build relationships, discuss possible activities, and increase community awareness of the importance of the early years within Cumberland. Below is a table representing the two innovation themes identified at the September 2022 Working Session. This table served as the basis of discussion at the first Cumberland Early Years Collaborative meeting in March 2023.

CONNECTION THEME	INFORMATION SHARING THEME
Increase connection and enrollment of all parents in Cumberland programs/services with a focus on more vulnerable families.	Improve connectedness between existing service providers, community members and parents.
WHY? Parents in Cumberland could benefit from a more personalized approach to connection, potentially reaching families who would otherwise be hesitant to connect.	WHY? ALL parents in Cumberland need clear and consistent source of information about early years offerings (both organizational and more personal).
WHAT? Family Connector/Community Champion who does outreach, supports peer-to-peer connections	WHAT? Create a "strategic plan" with early years vision for Cumberland (with multiple components).
Block Parties, Food focused connections events, piggy back on existing events (increase early years offerings & engagement at these events)	Block party series by area, with dual purpose of sharing information/resources AND connection. Perhaps parent leader(s) could be identified from these events.
Intergenerational programming	Valley Child is filterable by area, and becomes central source for directing families to programs, supports and events.

The two goals of hosting an initial Cumberland focused Early Years Collaborative meeting were:

- To gather Cumberland community members (including organizations and community members that don't necessarily participate in early years services/programs), and
- To establish a shared commitment to supporting early years families.

In addition to these community development and relationship building priorities, Connections was looking to the Cumberland community for input on next steps to better support Cumberland early years families.

59 Cumberland community stakeholders (service providers, municipal representatives, community organizations and those community members who might not normally think about young children and families) were invited to the session. Additionally a large effort was made to invite and support parents/caregiver to attend (including offering childminding at no cost).

The event was promoted through social media avenues, on the Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative (CVEYC) website, through Valley Child, and with the CVEYC network.

Of the **27 meeting participants, 6 were Cumberland-based parents** of early years children.

The Connections project now has a contact list of over 60 people who wish to be engaged in this important Cumberland focused work, including those who attended and others who could not.

Meeting Venue and Content

The Cumberland Collaborative meeting was held centrally in Cumberland at an accessible venue. Childminding for the meeting was available for up to 7 children. In addition, the children and Childminder were able to share both indoor and outdoor childcare spaces with the regular onsite childcare program. A local daycare was supportive of this endeavor and generously provided space to ensure that childminding was a possibility for this event.

Meeting content was based on feedback from the project's Steering Committee and team. Participants were given an overview of the Connections Project data for Cumberland, as well as a brief look into their local Early Development Instrument data for both Wave 7, and Wave 8. Following the overview of the project, the group was presented with guiding questions to ponder as we discussed the Cumberland Innovation themes, goals, and possible ways (actions) to better support early years families. The guiding questions were framed to support the Connections Project team to build a stronger understanding of which direction to pursue in Cumberland.



Attention Cumberland Parents & Caregivers of Early Years Children (0-8yrs)

- Share your voice!
- Help build a more connected community to raise young children in
- Guide community partners & service providers on how to better support the needs of all Cumberland-based young children & families

Cumberland Early Years Collaborative Meeting

Wednesday, March 22nd from 12:30pm-2:00pm, In Person
Location: Weird Church - Childminding available on site (limit: 7 children)
Please RSVP to Jessie at earlyyearscollaborative@gmail.com



THE BUILDING CONNECTIONS
FOR VALLEY FAMILIES PROJECT

An initiative of the Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative www.cveyc.ca

Summary

The meeting fostered generative conversations about the real challenges and possible system shifts that might better support Cumberland children and families. Honest, genuinely caring conversation surrounding better supporting parent mental health and childhood anxiety emerged. The participants made a notable effort to look at any proposed ideas through an equity lens, to ensure those most vulnerable children and families could be better supported and connected through our collective action.

The overall energy and inspiration at the first Cumberland Early Years Collaborative meeting were felt by those in attendance.

"Thank you so much! I was so inspired after yesterday- my brain was buzzing."

Next Steps

The Connections Project team is reviewing the information collected at the meeting. Below are suggested next steps for Cumberland. These ideas will be shared with Cumberland parents & caregivers and those who wish to be involved as the Connections project grows in Cumberland.

Quick Wins (Within 4 months or less):

- Explore the idea and planning potential of 2023 spring/summer events. For example, block party series with goals of connecting neighbours, sharing information, identifying community champions, working together towards shared goal, more data collection, and play!
- Print/maintain early years bulletin at Cumberland Recreation.
- Create 1 page regular add for Currently Cumberland and/or CV Collective magazine.
- Meet together as Cumberland Early Years Collaborative 4 x/year. Proposed meeting months; May, August, November, and February.



Medium Term (5 months - 1 year):

- Form working groups or sub-committees for each of the following:
 - Presenting a delegation to Cumberland mayor and council, outlining the Connections Project's findings, recommendations for action, and to invite more engagement from municipal changemakers.
 - Form "Little Cumberland Connections" event planning sub-committee and seek funding to support work (could include parent cafes, podcast, small food connection events, resilience-building activities, etc.)
 - Build and launch digital infrastructure for early years parents to propose ideas/ actions & community stakeholders to deliver on popular requests.

Longer Term: (1-2 years)

- Develop a comprehensive Village Early Years Vision and shared plan involving ALL community members.

The community response and receptivity of these actions will inform the project team to develop a strong innovation plan that supports Cumberland families with young children in finding play/learning opportunities and in building social connections in their neighbourhood.



"I've really enjoyed connecting with so many caring professionals who want the best for the community. It's very inspiring!"



Conclusion

Parenting early years children is a demanding task and the needs of each family is individual and unique. Feeling connected to community is central to parent and caregiver well-being, as well as childrens' healthy development. Not only does community connectedness create a valuable web of resources and supports that families can easily rely on, but it also gives them confidence to reach out and provide mutual support to others.

Paying attention to what families need within their local neighborhoods offers support through informal connections and the recognition that they can voice and lead community change. The *Building Connections Project* will continue to strive towards strengthening community connections on a neighborhood level within the Comox Valley, paying close attention to parents and caregivers as ongoing informants to the work that we do.

When families are supported, children thrive and become the foundation of stronger communities in the long term. The *Building Connections Project* has been part of the valuable work that is occurring under the umbrella of the [Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative](#). As this project evolves, it will continue to collaborate with the community to create positive changes that lead to connected families and healthy outcomes for children in the early years.