

Chapter 10

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND RESIDENT PARTICIPATION IN BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES

INTRODUCTION

What would the ideal community be like? The first images that might come to mind are those of tree-lined streets, comfortable houses, people chatting with their neighbours, children playing. Further thought might suggest the kinds of resources that would be available in the ideal neighbourhood – parks, libraries, shopping, schools, a variety of programs and activities for all. At the most profound level, however, our ideal community is a place where residents feel a sense of attachment and connection to their neighbours, where they feel safe and secure, where they feel a sense of belonging, and where they would want to stay.

Unfortunately, the reality for many people is very different from this ideal. Many individuals live in neighbourhoods where they don't know their neighbours, where they fear for their own and their children's safety, where crime is rampant, where houses and apartments are rundown, and where the fondest wish of many residents is to move away. Is it possible to somehow transform these unhealthy neighbourhoods into healthy, supportive ones? How would we begin such a task?

The literature suggests a number of processes that may be important in the development of healthy communities. These include resident participation in community decision making, collaboration between residents and professionals working in the community, a self-help approach, and the participation of community members in meaningful volunteer and educational experiences. Foremost among these processes is the active participation of residents in all matters affecting their community. Residents can be involved at many levels: they can participate in community programs, attend meetings and information sessions, chair committees, organize programs or events in the community, or lobby officials from government or human service agencies (Arnstein, 1969). The kind of participation we are concerned with is the kind defined by Wandersman (1984) as a process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs, and environments that affect them (Wandersman, 1984, p. 339).

The crucial element in this kind of resident participation is that it involves the resident as an initiator and a creator of programs and services, not merely a recipient of such programs, or even a consultant in the process of creating services (Burke, 1979). It is through the active participation of community members in program decision-making that they develop a sense of control or empowerment (Coates, 1971; Tilley & Carr, 1975). Moreover, the literature is replete with examples of instances in which a failure to involve community members has resulted in inferior programs (Wandersman, 1984), and instances in which citizen participation resulted in improved programs and services (e.g., Comer, 1976, 1980; Hodgson, 1984; Pancer & Nelson, 1990) and a better match between the needs of the community and the kinds of services provided (Iscove, 1974).

Community development and resident participation were key elements in the conceptualization of Better Beginnings, Better Futures. Community development was one of the three primary objectives of Better Beginnings, Better Futures (to strengthen the ability of communities to respond effectively to the social and economic needs of children and their families, OMCSS, 1989, p. 1). As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is the community-driven nature of Better Beginnings that distinguishes it from almost all other prevention programs in North America. With very few exceptions (perhaps only the 1, 2, 3, GO! project established in Montreal after Better Beginnings was initiated; see Bouchard, 1997), no other prevention program has focussed on community development or community involvement to the extent that Better Beginnings has. In this chapter, we describe how community development occurred at the different Better

Beginnings sites, and discuss in detail the ways in which residents have been involved in this process, and the impact that involvement had on the residents themselves and the communities in which they live.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

Community development can be considered as much a "process" as it is "programs." While many of the sites employ individuals who are designated "community development" staff, these staff spend a great deal of their time in activities that would not necessarily be described as "program" activities. They may accompany a group of residents to present a request for improved lighting and fencing to the local housing authority, organize a forum on job training, or work with residents to clean up a local park so that children can play safely.

Better Beginnings, Better Futures uses a *community-driven*, rather than *expert-driven* approach. Most prevention programs are conceived, planned and implemented by experts or professionals. In recent years there has been growing concern about the dominant role that professionals have played in those kinds of programs, and about the subordinate role played by the individuals who are meant to benefit from those programs. The problems inherent in expert-driven programs include the lack of control given to the community, the promotion of power imbalances between professionals and community members, and the failure to utilize community members' knowledge, abilities and commitment. As well, expert-driven programs often focus on deficits rather than strengths and do not give people the opportunity to help themselves (Pancer & Nelson, 1990).

The community-driven approach taken by Better Beginnings, Better Futures is very different from expert-driven approaches. The following are some of the key characteristics of the community-driven approach:

- " Community residents are actively involved in all aspects of program development and delivery; they are key decision-makers in the process of deciding what kinds of programs are needed, how these programs will be implemented, who will staff them, and where they will be offered.
- " The programs and activities offered at each site are created to meet the needs of the community, as these needs have been expressed by community residents themselves.
- " Community building and community development underlie much of the programming in Better Beginnings communities.
- " Accessibility is a major concern in the approach to Better Beginnings programming. Every effort is made to make programs geographically accessible, available in the language that residents speak, and comfortable. Barriers to participation, such as transportation and the need for childcare, are addressed to ensure that residents can participate without cost or other restrictions.
- " Community events and celebrations are considered a crucial means of bringing individuals together and giving them a sense of community.

Community Development Goals and Activities

What are the major goals of community development, and how are they achieved? The following describes some of the major goals of community development, and the activities that have been used to achieve them at the Better Beginnings sites.

Goals:

- " improving residents ability to advocate, on their own behalf, with government and community agencies;
- " working in partnership with residents and community agencies to coordinate services and secure other needed programs and services.

These kinds of goals were achieved through partnerships such as that formed in Sudbury between the project and the Separate School Board:

The need for francophones to establish their own programs sparked a dialogue with the Separate School Board to access the Centre St-Gabriel in January of 1992 to set up a program in the French language.

Goals:

- " enabling residents to know and understand their neighbours better;
- " strengthening ties between cultural groups.

Residents came to know and understand one another through many of the projects programs, and also through working together, training together and participating in community events together. This also helped individuals from different cultures get to know one another, promoting understanding between cultural groups in the community:

Most of the project s activities and programs encourage this objective (strengthen ties between community residents). The staff have noticed that there are markedly fewer conflicts between neighbours. One member observed that Since so many of us have been trained in conflict mediation, which is really just common sense problem-solving skills, more people feel obliged to try to settle their differences amicably .

Goals:

- " establishing ties between community agencies and residents;
- " networking with other community organizations;
- " working in partnership with residents and community agencies to coordinate services, and secure other needed programs and services.

There was evidence in all of the projects that residents were forming a closer and more equitable relationship with service providers from the various agencies, primarily by getting to know them as individuals, on a basis of equality. This helped residents communicate more confidently with agencies, and it also enabled them to work more effectively to obtain needed programs and services.

Goal:

- " facilitating the development of new community groups, helping them to organize themselves and to get training and resources.

Better Beginnings sites often facilitated the development of community groups and organizations, and once these groups were established, helped them to obtain needed resources:

The community workers facilitate new community groups, helping them to organize themselves and to get specific training and resources. For example, two community workers are presently working with an anti-poverty group that is trying to organize self-help workshops and community parties. Another community worker is working with a parent to organize their tenants association. Many of the staff sit on Parent Councils at the schools in the area.

Goals:

- " giving the community more control over its economic future;
- " providing training opportunities to allow residents to enhance their organizational, self-presentation, problem-solving and work skills.

Helping residents become more employable by providing training was one means employed by Better Beginnings sites to enhance the economic welfare of community members. The sites also worked to reduce the impact of economic hardship by establishing community gardens, clothing exchanges, bartering systems, and other activities:

Community members are provided with a number of training opportunities to enable them to participate in the project. Some are trained to co-facilitate groups and chair meetings and these volunteers receive ongoing mentoring from staff members. Most childcare providers and assistants were and continue to be hired from within the community and receive intensive training and supervision. Some of the Family Visitors were originally hired from within the community and trained as peer educators. The base of job skills in the community has grown considerably because of Better Beginnings.

Goal:

- " increasing social and recreational opportunities.

Many individuals in Better Beginnings communities live in isolated pockets in the community, making it difficult to connect with their neighbours or to participate in Better Beginnings programs and activities. To deal with this challenge, Better Beginnings projects often brought the programs to the residents.

The "Travelling Road Show" in Sudbury, which goes to a different location each week, is a program specifically formed to establish links with communities which are self-contained (housing projects) and unable to access Better Beginnings programs.

Goal:

- " increasing the sense of community and pride in the community (e.g., through community events and celebrations).

One element that was considered crucial to community development was residents' sense of community and pride in their community. One way in which Better Beginnings attempted to increase this was to hold a variety of community events.

A sports day with NIKE was organized in November. Forty children from the programs attended. [Other community events included] a francophone literacy meeting and luncheon, breakfast with Santa, can-skate programs, participation in francophone festivals, winter carnival, health fair, outdoor leadership programs for the community kids, and a parent group.

Many of the Better Beginnings programs aided the community development process in more than one way. Community kitchens, for example, not only provide assistance in dealing with economic hardship, they also bring residents together and give them a sense of accomplishment.

The kitchens are not just about cooking together, they are a support system for the people in them. Many members have increased their knowledge about cooking, their self-esteem and confidence. They create community. A staff said: Everyone in the kitchens learns something every day from one another.

RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT

Resident participation is the cornerstone of any neighbourhood or community development process. From the earliest stages, it was understood that residents of each of the communities selected as Better Beginnings, Better Futures sites would be involved not only as participants in or "recipients" of the various programs, but as decision makers and planners of those programs as well. Indeed, the document that outlined the major themes and principles underlying the initiative stated that It is important that members of the community have key responsibilities for decision-making about the design, implementation and evaluation in community-based primary prevention programs (OMCSS, 1989 p. 70).

What Motivated Residents to Participate in Better Beginnings?

Residents had different motives for becoming involved as project volunteers and staff. The reasons for getting involved with the project have not changed much since the early phases of the project; however, the project now seems to be better known and understood by the neighbourhood and residents.

" Gaining employment

Since many staff are hired from within the organization, people have come to recognize that volunteering may give one an advantage in the hunt for employment. One site makes this very visible through their policy to award job applicants extra points for volunteering. With people struggling to survive financially, it was not surprising to learn that the possibility of making some money was a prime motivator for some participants.

" Bringing up children in a French language and culture (Francophone sites)

Residents in the Francophone sites participated in the project because they felt it was a place where they and their children could improve their French and engage in the French language and culture. Participants have stated that their own and their children's French has improved markedly as a result of their participation. They also note the importance of learning and maintaining their culture and language.

" **Becoming more knowledgeable about Native language and culture (Walpole Island)**

Many of the residents who participated in the Walpole Island Better Beginnings project were motivated by the desire to learn (and have their children learn) more about native language, crafts and traditions.

" **Making the community a better place to live**

Residents were also motivated to get involved because of their desire to improve their communities.

I can't picture Parents for Better Beginnings [the Toronto Better Beginnings site] not being around. I think that my community needs it [PFBB] there, so if I can be a part of a committee that's going to say "Maybe we should fundraise this or this . . .," write letters or whatever, then I will do that.

" **Helping others**

For many residents, being able to help others was a primary factor in their involvement. Some people feel a desire to give back to the community without receiving anything in return because this gives them a sense of satisfaction. The project provided these residents with an avenue to help others.

" **Learning and acquiring skills**

For many participants who became involved with Better Beginnings, a chance to learn new skills was the motivation for participating in the project. Many participants who mentioned this motive were recent immigrants who saw in the project an opportunity to informally improve their English skills and learn about the local culture. Others wanted to develop employment skills in order to be better prepared when the time came to join the workforce.

" **Satisfying curiosity**

Some residents got involved because they were curious about what the project entailed and were also interested in keeping in touch with what was happening in their community.

" **Getting involved in something meaningful, interesting and valued**

Many residents participated in the project because it seemed interesting, allowed them to express their opinions about decisions that affected their neighbourhood, and provided an opportunity to use their skills to do something meaningful and valued, which often resulted in a sense of achievement.

Just being able to see what's happening with everything, like the planning. . . . You can say, "That's not a good idea, or that's a good idea." . . . Helping to plan things . . . feeling like you're important, like you have an opinion and you have a voice . . . (parent focus group).

" **Seeing Better Beginnings as a voice for the community**

Better Beginnings staff saw the project as a central place where residents could gather to voice their problems and concerns about things occurring in the community, and it provided for this activity.

" **Being able to monitor children**

Some parents felt most comfortable knowing they could be near their kids, whether in school or childcare, while the parents were participating in Better Beginnings programs or activities. If any problems occurred, the parent could be right there to deal with it immediately.

Being close to my kids. Being able to see them, what s going on in the school and that kind of thing. That way I m close. That s probably the main reason to be close to them.

" **Being recognized for one's contributions**

A factor that maintained resident involvement was the encouragement and recognition of participants' contributions. Knowing that one's work is valued, and receiving positive encouragement, is all that some people need to be motivated to continue their involvement.

Other motives for getting involved in the project included participants' perception that there were opportunities to learn through the project and to share new abilities with the community. Others realized that the project allowed them to learn new teamwork skills, and to learn about their community as well as about other cultures.

" **Fostering resident involvement**

A great deal of effort has been invested in fostering resident involvement at the eight demonstration sites, but there were differences among the sites, as well. There were different ideas guiding actions about how many volunteer residents should be involved, where they should participate, and how many other types of participants should also be present. These ideas about the level and type of resident involvement have had an impact on recruiting attempts at the sites. The sites with the highest levels of volunteer resident involvement all seemed to have had clear objectives to achieve at least 50 per cent resident involvement on key work groups as quickly as possible. Several strategies were employed to enhance resident involvement:

" **Giving priority to resident participation**

The two sites with the greatest numbers of volunteer residents involved made it clear that achieving high levels of resident involvement in all important decisions received a great deal of attention early in the project development process. Resident involvement was a basic value that influenced all decisions and work procedures at those sites.

" **Modifying working procedures**

Most sites highlighted the need to modify the procedures normally used by professionals in meetings and in making decisions. It was considered important to make the atmosphere of meetings more comfortable for residents who were getting involved for the first time. This involved simplifying formal decision-making procedures, encouraging professionals not to use unnecessary jargon, and using different ways to present information at meetings (e.g., adding a visual presentation to a verbal one, and providing a verbal clarification of written material). Suggestions were made to hold meetings at times convenient to residents rather than necessarily during professional working hours. It was also seen as important to allow residents to speak for themselves and to take on responsibilities such as chairing meetings and making reports from sub-committees to the board.

" **Providing training and ongoing support**

There was general agreement that concrete supports were necessary to foster resident involvement - for example, paying for or providing childcare during meetings, compensating for lost revenue if appropriate, helping with transportation. A number of site reports commented on the need to train residents for the roles that they were playing on boards and committees and, perhaps, to provide them with more between-meeting support so that they can take part in discussions in a more effective fashion. The need to provide staff support to subcommittees and working groups was mentioned.

" **Limiting professional involvement**

At most sites, there was a perception that it was necessary to control the number of professionals taking part in decision-making structures, and, in some cases, the types of professionals involved, so that residents would not be intimidated and overwhelmed by more experienced participants.

" **Encouraging participation of ethnic minorities**

Early on in the projects' development, there was relatively little success at involving members of minority communities, particularly when language proficiency was an obstacle. However, outreach went on, and ideas arose about what would be helpful - the hiring of staff from minority communities, making available publicity material in different languages, developing some program components specifically for minorities (e.g., a parent group, a parent-child program), using translations at meetings and in outreach, establishing working relationships with associations representing minority groups, and having some separate organizational structures and program development groups that operate in different languages. In general, these strategies proved quite successful in attracting members of diverse cultures to participate more actively in Better Beginnings.

" **The effects of government requirements**

The negotiations between the sites and the government representatives affected resident involvement in three major ways: (a) by reducing the size of target communities for some sites, changing the definition of which residents should be involved; (b) insisting that some sites increase the numbers of residents involved on their main decision-making bodies or that they involve residents more quickly than proposed; and (c) requiring more formal procedures and controls on boards/steering committees, which changed what was expected of participating residents.

" **Other suggestions**

A number of site reports stressed the need for sites to use community development or outreach workers in the recruitment of participant residents. Some site reports suggested that having programs available makes the attraction of new residents easier.

How Were Residents Involved?

The following list of the activities residents were involved with at the demonstration sites illustrates some of the most common contributions residents made:

- " actively participating on major committees and subcommittees (often chairing these committees);
- " serving as active members of partner agency boards;

- " participating in decision-making regarding program management (e.g. generating budgets, planning programs, community events);
- " supporting and managing programs (e.g., purchasing and preparing food for meetings, community events, organizing toy lending-library, providing childcare);
- " being involved in community consultation (e.g. providing feedback on research reports, taking part in hiring research staff and recruiting research participants);
- " donating goods and services (e.g., food and crafts for fund-raising, interpretation and translation);
- " being active in programs and activities/support (e.g., volunteering in snack program, family resource centre, classroom);
- " working as paid staff (e.g., childcare assistants, family visitors, office workers, coordinators);
- " participating on the Better Beginnings Network (the network to which all Better Beginnings projects belonged);
- " advocating on behalf of the project and the community (e.g., making presentations to public officials, writing letters);
- " fundraising;
- " participating in promotional activities (e.g., making presentations to visitors to the site and to off-site groups and organizations, tending displays in malls and at community events);
- " identifying community needs.

CHALLENGES, OBSTACLES, BARRIERS AND NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT

Although participants have reaped many benefits from being involved in Better Beginnings, some have faced, and still do on occasion, various obstacles to staying involved. While a number of the obstacles to getting residents involved that were identified in the early phases of the project are no longer significant challenges, others continue to prevail in some form. Nevertheless, important progress was reported in involving residents at the sites. However, the challenges described below illustrate the complexity of fostering meaningful resident participation in the project.

Lack of Trust and Tension Between Service Providers and Residents

Residents were reluctant to get involved, and then to stay involved, because of their initial lack of trust of the service providers and the tension that resulted from this. Some residents had had negative experiences with other agencies, or heard of others' such experiences, which left them mistrustful. However, over time, trust has developed between staff, agencies and residents, as residents learned through experience that staff and agencies are genuinely interested in helping people to build a better community.

One of the factors that created tension between residents and service providers was the language and procedures used in meetings. Many residents felt intimidated by agency representatives and by the meetings because of the professional jargon and formal processes that were used, often without orienting the residents to this new structure and language. Some residents were not only intimidated but feared agency representatives, especially those from child welfare agencies, and often were too afraid to clarify the meanings of words, procedures or financial decisions. Residents at one site set up secret meetings at first to figure out what occurred at committee meetings. However, over time, residents sitting at the committee table with various agency representatives realized the staff were people, just like themselves, with a job to do. Agency representatives also began to recognize the need to conduct the sort of meetings in which residents could actively participate. Some sites found ways, such as making meetings more informal, setting up penalties for using bad words, creating a buddy system for new members, and providing explanations of procedures (which was done willingly by a chair and the sponsoring agency's director). Regularly training committee and action group members has also made them more familiar with the language and procedures used at meetings.

She [one of the human service professionals associated with the project] kept saying, "We need you, we need you." And then she would bring up this empower. What the devil is empower? But most people did not know what it meant. And she used other words too, because that's part of the lingo that goes with being educated and so on.

Residents, at times, felt that service providers didn't really understand what it was like to live in the community, and what the community really needed:

The people that don't live here don't know, they can't feel [neighbourhood residents'] suffering, they have to be in their shoes. If you don't live here for 24 hours, you don't really know them, it doesn't matter how long you work here.

The imbalance of power was an obstacle to fostering meaningful resident participation in the early phases of the project. Being involved in committees and participating in decision making with professionals was a new experience for many residents. Resident and agency representatives' working relationships were strained at first since neither group was used to the different styles and ideas of the other. At first, residents were intimidated at meetings and therefore lacked assertiveness. However, more recently, residents participate in meetings at least as much as agency and staff do.

Differences in Cultural Background, Language and Lifestyle

Trying to involve residents from other countries can involve barriers of communication, expectation, and culture. However, these residents are taking on more roles and now participate to a greater extent than they did at the beginning of the project. Staff are still learning how to make programs more accessible to new immigrant families, and continuously work at increasing their knowledge about different cultures and their needs. An effort has also been made to hire multicultural staff for various positions in the project.

[Asian parents] are not likely to join committees and teams because of the language and because they are too busy. If they can't speak English well enough to join the group, they will just be embarrassed to try to express themselves. Most families are working, are not on social assistance, so they are very busy with family responsibilities, and have no time to volunteer. They don't have any spare time. Sometimes they even work Saturday and Sunday, and they also need time to relax and spend with their children.

Restricted Funding Results in Restricted Programming and Access to Programs

The range of community problems that residents would like to deal with cannot always be addressed because of the limits in Better Beginnings funding. Attempting to run programs past capacity has resulted in overcrowding and overworked staff, at which point the program is at risk of becoming ineffective or may experience participant drop-off:

Playgroup was starting to get really crowded. I felt claustrophobic in there, it was really noisy! I just can't handle all this noise and this screaming and everything. Sure it was because the kids are having fun. Well, poor Better Beginnings. The Playgroup is started and it's advertised in the pamphlets and everything and more and more people are starting to go, but the place is too small! The kids are bumping into each other and running into each other, and you know, that's too bad because the idea of Playgroup is good.

Equally important, financially disadvantaged families sometimes cannot participate if Better Beginnings requires a financial contribution. Financial constraints, despite everything, limit the participation of extremely disadvantaged families in some activities. While most programs are free, and family-g geared activities are designed to allow children of all ages to participate, sometimes the project asks for a small financial contribution, or families need to provide their own transportation, meal or snack. This can put a financial burden on families that would like to be involved. The site at which this issue arose has recognized that extremely disadvantaged families may be prevented from becoming involved, and a decision has been made to examine this issue in the near future.

I have counted the number of activities the other day, just for the fun of it. And you have to include \$1.50 for the bus: round trip, it is \$3.00 for the day. Even if the babysitter is provided for, if she lives on the other side of the city, it s another \$3.00. If there are other activities . . . , it comes to \$10.00 per week, just for small activities. Minimum: \$40.00 per month.

Tensions Resulting from Hiring Community Members

One of the benefits of participating in Better Beginnings is the possibility of gaining employment through the project. However, this benefit has some negative consequences; residents often compete for jobs and are devastated when they are not hired, especially when they feel they are qualified and have contributed much time and effort to the project. This disappointment can lead to jealousy, suspicions of favouritism, and resentment toward the project or among residents themselves because of failed expectations.

Another challenge resulting from hiring community members derived from the loss of freedom to speak out that some residents experienced when they became staff members. As residents, they had felt free to speak their minds about Better Beginnings and the community; as staff, they felt they had to be more restrained in what they said about the project:

I liked [Action Group] better as a participant, cause I could talk and I was heard. More than I m heard now. Now, we re told to keep [quiet]. We re not told this when we re hired, but learned it as we went along. [Her colleague adds:] They boost you up to talk, to be strong, then you get hired and you re told to stop. . . . Hard for me personally.

Difficulty in Setting Boundaries Between Work and Personal Life

Three sites described in detail the negative impact that staff residents have experienced in attempting to maintain a clear boundary between community life and work. Resident staff who work closely with community residents and who sometimes live in the same neighbourhood develop close bonds and a sense of intimacy, which frequently leads to demands being put on staff outside working hours. People have varying expectations of staff who are also residents; the community does not acknowledge staff people's official work hours, and often expect staff residents to contribute more time to the community, which makes the staff question their responsibility to the project versus their rights as community members. This dual role can be a source of stress as staff attempt to balance taking care of themselves and supporting their community. There appears to be no simple solution to this complex problem, since it is easy to get caught up in other people's problems while trying to simultaneously keep one's distance. In order to address this problem, some sites mentioned training staff about how and where to draw a boundary between their personal and work life.

Potential for Burnout and Over-Involvement

Near-burnout occurred for those who faced the challenge of juggling family life and their commitment to the project. Some mothers had to struggle in order to continue their volunteering because their children resented the time that was spent away from home, or because of their partner's opposition or lack of support. Some participants who experienced this stress had to decrease their involvement considerably in order to meet their family's needs. In some cases, participants had to withdraw from the project either briefly or permanently.

My husband would take (the children), and after a while he started saying, "No, don't do any more volunteering, I don't want to watch the kids anymore," because they just drive him nuts. They won't go to bed for him or anything. . . . He would have to call me up and say, "Get home and just put these kids to bed."

People already experiencing stress in their lives may easily feel overwhelmed by the amount of work there is to do. Others are so willing to help out that they end up taking on too much responsibility and eventually find they need to reduce their involvement. Some people who have had multiple demands placed on them find it hard to say no and do not wish to decrease their involvement. However, this over-involvement can often lead to burnout as multiple demands are placed on a few volunteers. Sometimes, participants find that receiving a request for help is flattering, while at other times it is a struggle to juggle their other responsibilities with the project's needs. This was especially true in the early years of the project when there were only a few volunteers that were heavily relied upon to play diverse roles, to attend several meetings a month, and to help in the promotion of the project.

There was a real high level of stress, burnout . . . because although other people were doing this as part of their work and they could go home after, this was part of my life, so I couldn't get away from it. . . . I was involved with it during the day, then [when] I went home Better Beginnings was still in my life. . . . Because there were only a few community people at first, I felt really stressed.

Other Parents' Negative Parenting Practices and Attitudes

Some families were reluctant to continue their participation with the project after witnessing other parents' negative parenting practices and attitudes while attending programs. It seems this problem is not an easy one for staff to resolve.

There is no respect between the parent and the child. They hit their kids, they yell at them, they swear at them and I find that very hard to deal with and that was actually one of the reasons we stopped going.

Gender Imbalance

In the early years of the project, a great gender imbalance existed in the volunteering with, staffing of, and participation in programs, suggesting that perhaps not enough was done to attract males to the project.

When I first started going to the action group, there were two men on the action group, and one at first he was introducing himself as the token male. He'd been the only one for a while. . . . It's still taking time to get them to come out. A lot of them just feel very shut in. It's taking them longer to realize that there is something there for them. . . . At least, they are starting to realize that there is something there.

Closely related to the issue of a gender imbalance in the programs was the "woman-centred" focus throughout the project. The few men who initially participated worked hard to promote the use of language that was inclusive, and designed programs such as a dads' support group for male participants.

Age of Volunteers

Many volunteers have some kind of a connection with the project that usually results from having a child participating in the program; therefore, often volunteers come from a narrow age group since most have children in the early school years. Consequently, special efforts need to be made to involve those who are not directly connected with the project.

I also think, one of the things that is a barrier and will probably continue to be a barrier for a while is the types of programs that we run and I'm thinking more in terms of the ages, the age group. Because as much as we have a lot of programs, we're still bound by our mandate, which is [age] 4 to 8. So, one of the things I'm thinking about now is that when you go out to do outreach, if we can't offer, if we don't offer, programs for kids that are beyond 8, I mean we're hard-pressed to get those people involved. It's all, what's in it for me? And very rare the person is going to come that really, one that don't have a child here, or their child has never been here, or that they're not getting something really out of it. To become a volunteer, to get involved just for the sake of it, that is very rare. Because most people have a connection somehow . . . (staff focus group).

Conflict with Schedules or Inconvenient Location

While it is not economical or possible for some residents to participate because they live too far away from the project, or have moved out of the neighbourhood, others cannot participate because meetings are held during hours that allow easier access to those who are unemployed than those who hold regular full-time employment. This suggests that certain residents, such as project employees or professionals, are excluded from meetings, which are mostly held during the day. Childcare at one site is inconsistently offered during meetings, impeding the involvement of those parents who need childcare in order to participate. Some sites have addressed this problem by making meeting times more flexible in order to be more accessible to those who hold full-time employment.

Uncertainty over Project Funding

A barrier that many staff and residents experienced near the end of the demonstration period was uncertainty over whether the project would continue. The government could have cut funding completely, which made it difficult for staff to stay motivated and to motivate others to stay involved.

The last couple of years was the uncertainty of the project and whether or not it was going to be around; I think, more or less, people sort of, . . . , but even in how we were conducting ourselves, I mean as a staff we were more or less winding down; we sort of, "Well what s the use?" kind of thing. So our attitude may have been a part of why and how we deal with people, how we encourage people to be involved. Because we were wondering about our own staff and our own self . . . (staff focus group).

Simultaneously, however, this uncertainty inspired some community residents to advocate and lobby for continued funding for the project.

Also I think at that time they became, they [the residents] took most control of the situation because they started writing letters we asked them, and they did in different languages, they wanted the project to continue. So they [the government] thought, they were really surprised by the people who wrote in . . . (staff focus group).

Perception that Project is Intended for Families in Need

Some residents limit their involvement, identify more with staff than other residents, and decline taking on leaderships roles due to the misperception that the project is supposed to benefit only disadvantaged families.

Other people in the neighbourhood believe the project is intended to benefit only those in need; for example, families on social assistance, or with particular kinds of problems, so it does not apply to their family.

Not Feeling Valued for Time Spent Volunteering

One of the benefits of involvement in Better Beginnings is the satisfaction people feel when their contributions are recognized. But if time spent volunteering for the project is not recognized, residents may feel that their work is not validated. However, staff attempt to address feedback from residents immediately in order to minimize the negative impact on them.

People work so hard . . . to set it (Playgroup) up nicely and make it inviting. . . and [they come back] at 11h30 and the place looks destroyed.

Limitations of Training of Community Residents and Staff

Lack of financial or human resources create a barrier to making resident involvement as meaningful as it has the potential to be. When human resources are limited, staff find it difficult to balance the time spent on training volunteers versus that spent providing services. It is especially challenging to find the time necessary to train residents who have little work experience, or require constant direction and guidance. Similarly, training courses cost money that staff feel could be spent on service delivery. However, it is recognized the training of community members is an important aspect of Better Beginnings, and that it is important that community residents be hired for the project; therefore, management at one site offer

extensive professional development experiences and training to staff and management on the subjects of communication, conflict resolution, working styles, and organizational practices.

Lack of Support for Newcomers

One site mentioned the lack of orientation for new participants. This was also a current issue for another site, as illustrated by residents' observations about how new participants used to be nurtured, but that this had been lost over time. As a result, some participants feel a lack of importance or belongingness.

At the beginning, the parents were so much more encouraged to come and were nurtured and stroked. . . . It's now the same group of parents over and over again. They're kind of taken for granted, and the new people come along [and] they're just kind of 'whoosh, they're pushed right in, and that nurturing and that adjustment hasn't occurred and I think it might not have been as easy for them.

Language Barriers in Bilingual Communities

Sites that conduct many or all of their programs in French (Cornwall and Sudbury's francophone community) face a barrier related to the language and culture that are essential to the communities. Even though the Better Beginnings sites are in a French-speaking location, some children come from families in which one of the parents is English-speaking and has only a limited knowledge of the French language. Better Beginnings leaders welcome English-speaking parents and attempt to use a variety of methods to facilitate communication with all parents (by using translators, publishing newsletters in both languages, or speaking English). However, when the French language is used exclusively during all formal meetings and in report writing, many people might be excluded.

There also appears to be a constant tension among participants who hold divided views about the language issue. One favours promotion of the French language and culture with the hope that English-speaking parents will eventually learn sufficient French to participate in the program; the other favours use of the language spoken by most parents in each situation.

One site formed committees to address these obstacles. At one point, it was decided that meetings would be conducted bilingually, a translator would be chosen at the beginning of each meeting, and bilingual members would be encouraged to converse in French. However, despite these efforts, meetings are mostly conducted in English due to the fact that a majority of the residents were not bilingual, thus hindering the implementation of this recommendation. People are encouraged to express themselves in the language of their choice during meetings. A solution to this problem was the creation of work groups that gave members the opportunity to meet within their cultural group and to express themselves in the language of their choice. As a result, this obstacle seems to have been overcome.

The language barrier also posed a major problem when this site attempted to integrate French- and English-speaking programs, because it was difficult for children in these programs to converse in French, which resulted in parents threatening to withdraw their children if the situation continued.

HIRING NEIGHBOURHOOD RESIDENTS

Hiring neighbourhood residents was a major strategy at all demonstration sites for incorporating resident wisdom into project and program development. It was clear that resident employment has had a substantial impact on the projects. Some of these effects were unanticipated.

Hiring Priorities and Impacts

Sites identified a variety of challenges resulting from hiring active community members as staff:

- " the "loss" of (usually the most) active volunteer leaders as they become staff;
- " confusion as resident staff continue to hold board or committee positions that they held as volunteers;
- " a "loss of status" as employed residents feel they lose their voice as community representatives and as they find themselves supervised by professionals;
- " tensions with neighbourhood peers not in staff positions;
- " loss of incentives for some residents to volunteer if they did not obtain staff positions for which they had applied.

Resident-Only Groups

Four of the seven demonstration sites had, or wanted to have, some form of resident-only group that was initiated through the project for example, an independent community group, an advisory group to the board or steering committee, a program group or a program development group. One site attempted somewhat unsuccessfully to link with an existing school's parents group and most sites held periodic meetings of residents for various purposes. Several sites reported the use of resident-only groups (with staff support) as part of their program activities.

Where the resident-only groups were clearly integrated into the administrative structure of the site for example, a program development group making suggestions to the board and implementing program decisions there were few difficulties reported. However, two sites invested considerable effort into developing an "independent" resident-only community group with unclear linkages to the project's administration. Early on, one of these community groups made substantial contributions to the initial project proposal and to the early project development stages at the site. Yet, as the sites' administrative structures become formalized, as residents began to participate on these structures, and as residents were hired and program activities begun, the purpose of these community groups became less clear and their influence diminished.

Payment and Recognition of Volunteers

One of the difficult issues faced early on by the sites had to do with payment of resident volunteers. In almost all the sites there had been discussions, sometimes lengthy and heated ones, about if and how residents should be compensated for things that might be considered to be "volunteer" activities, such as attending meetings, organizing community events, and helping out with programs. In all but one of the sites it was decided that only residents' direct expenses would be compensated. Parents were to be reimbursed for childcare, transportation and other expenses that they incurred in order to participate in the project. In practice, residents were also compensated on a "fee-for-service" basis for specific, time-limited tasks, such as cooking and serving meals at meetings and round-tables, setting up and taking down playgroup decorations and equipment, and serving as breakfast attendants.

Residents were paid (for a while) for the time they spent attending committee meetings in only one of the sites. In this site, they were given \$10 plus an additional \$7.40 an hour to attend meetings. Officially, this was designated as payment for childcare and transportation expenses, but it was understood that this was really intended to compensate residents for their time and contribution. Initially, this payment appeared to be sanctioned by the ministries.

There were a number of reasons for paying residents to volunteer their time to the project:

- " payment was thought to encourage more people from the community to participate;
- " payment compensated residents for the costs that they incurred in participating;
- " payment redressed the inequity between service providers (who were being paid for their work) and residents who were not, which may have prevented a more equal partnership from developing between the two groups; and
- " this provided financial assistance to residents, many of whom were suffering from financial hardship.

There were also reasons for not paying participants to volunteer:

- " many residents opposed the idea of paying people for volunteer work, feeling that volunteer work should not be compensated;
- " while paying residents for committee work may have reduced the inequity between residents and service providers, it may have produced other inequities in the project between those who are paid for their participation and those who are not paid. A concern that this practice would result in a "two-tiered system of rewarding volunteers" that would "split the very group we're trying to unite" was the major reason that the policy was discontinued at the site in which it was implemented; and
- " payment involves considerable expense.

Recognizing Volunteers

While most of the sites felt that a policy of paying volunteers was too problematic to implement, there was still a desire to recognize the contribution of community members to the project. Indeed, at one of the sites, the parents involved with the project felt that payment or other gratuities should be used to recognize and reward already-active parents, rather than as a way to motivate inactive parents. In order to accomplish this, the site established a "Fun and Recognition Committee" to organize and plan events to recognize the contributions of the volunteering parents. Parents seemed to feel more comfortable with planning these special recognition events than they were with payment.

Relationships Between Community Residents and Service Providers

At first, there were difficulties in the relationships between agency representatives and community residents at many of the sites. This was somewhat expected because these two groups of people from completely different backgrounds were thrown together and expected to be able to function effectively together.

In the first month of the project's operations, residents found it difficult relating to service providers on an equal basis. They were somewhat intimidated by the differences in language, by the formality and structure of committee meetings, and by the decision-making process employed in the project.

However, over time these difficulties are lessening, as residents become accustomed to the operations of the project and as trust is developed between the agencies and community members.

The relationships between agencies and residents is slowly changing over time, mostly because of the increasing number of people who have had positive experiences interacting with agencies. The proximity and familiarity of agency representatives has been a major factor in overcoming fear and building trust among residents.

Along this road to partnership between the agencies and the residents, lessons have been learned. These lessons include the realization that professional language and jargon are not appropriate in dealings with community members, and that members of a team will not feel like partners unless both sides are equally represented.

[In the beginning], service providers greatly outnumbered residents and staff. As it was expected, building new relationships between these different stakeholders in the project was challenging under those circumstances. . . . [Furthermore], service providers and staff were aware of the need to make sure that their language and actions were not excluding residents from participating.

Despite the progress that has been made, it seems that residents still are mistrustful of some agencies. Many times these are the agencies that have to intervene in crises and, as such, pose a threat to the community members.

At the crisis intervention level, there is still fear and distrust between residents and agency partners that tends to be concentrated among families who have been involved with child welfare agencies.

It appears that developing partnerships demands a lot of time and patience because for many, these working relationships are built mainly on positive personal interactions between service providers and community members.

The degree of comfort residents feel with particular service providers is related to the extent to which the agency has integrated its services with the project, and is directly related to the opportunity residents have had to interact personally with agency representatives.

It also appears that there is a difference between residents' perceptions of service providers and their perceptions of Better Beginnings staff. Although there are sometimes problems with the service providers, it seems that the staff have been accepted into the community wholeheartedly, and for some residents they are even seen as extended family members.

The project staff's ability to maintain an open and welcoming attitude, to go to people and to actively listen, seems to represent a major advantage to facilitate integration of new participants.

It's like an extended family, members go out of their way to support you. . . . [One woman notes that the staff are genuinely kind]: Staff enjoy helping, so I can accept their help. . . . They have compassion for those on social assistance.

The staff have become a second family for many who otherwise have no reliable source of family. . . . It is the connections that the Better Beginnings staff have initiated between people which has been the ultimate focus, and has become the community's greatest resource.

Therefore, in spite of tensions and occasional setbacks, residents have experienced fairly positive relationships with staff and service providers, and both sides have realized that there are many positive things to be gained through continued partnership.

Now that Better Beginnings is established as a leader in the community, it is setting an example for how agencies can work with the communities that they serve. Other organizations such as schools, hospitals, city council, and the housing authority are having to answer to the community for not providing meaningful community involvement like Better Beginnings!

BENEFITS FOR RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT

Participating in Better Beginnings, Better Futures programs and activities resulted in many benefits for residents and their families, the project itself, and the community as a whole. In the early phases of the project, residents who were most involved derived the most benefits. While those who are fairly involved still do gain the most benefits, many more residents now share the advantages of being involved in the project.

At each urban site, a selected group of residents were interviewed about their experiences in Better Beginnings. Those interviewed had to have lived in the community for at least two years, and to have had substantial involvement with the project. At least half at each site had children in the focal cohort. Participants varied widely in age and cultural background. On average, twelve people were interviewed per site. Much of what follows about benefits for residents is based on our report on their interviews (Pancer & Foxall, 1998).

Achieving Personal Growth, Development and a Sense of Empowerment

As a result of the various ways participants are given opportunities to get involved in the project, residents who have done so have gained a sense of confidence in their abilities and increased self-esteem, they have become more assertive, independent and more aware of the resources available to them, and have developed a variety of life skills. They also feel worthwhile and feel a sense of empowerment. Many feel satisfaction from having the opportunity to help others in their community.

" Enhanced confidence and self-esteem.

One of the most frequently mentioned benefits of participating in Better Beginnings has been an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. Many active participants attribute these enhanced feelings of confidence and esteem to the opportunities they were given at Better Beginnings. They were able to engage in new kinds of activities, such as attending meetings, planning programs and events, interviewing candidates for staff positions, making presentations to teachers, professionals and politicians, and

developing other skills they could use to help the project. For the first time, residents felt that they were listened to and respected for their opinions. Many residents were shy and withdrawn before they gained this confidence, and they were surprised to see themselves in situations where they spoke their mind and took charge of their lives.

Better Beginnings gave me more confidence because now I am doing the Parenting Group and before I would have never led a group, not in my whole life. And I am going into a theatre group and I never would have done that before. And now getting involved in that Parenting Group, which I never would have done before; you know, it's a group of people there and me at the front talking. And learning how to use a flip chart and everything. It's going good. And I am just feeling more confident, not being shy.

Residents also described feeling good about themselves and being more satisfied with their lives as a result of what they have learned through the project.

Staff could see the confidence building in some residents as they took small steps in their involvement in order to prepare themselves for eventual employment. Each new experience led to more confidence, which allowed movement to bigger and better challenges.

I know we've had so many [parents] who have gone from the snack program to the classroom. . . . You see people gradually through the various stages, preparing for work. . . . [One parent] is now on the Board of the Health Centre and probably through involvement here she got experience and confidence to do that. . . . [Another parent has] been involved with the snack program and is very keen about the community. She decided to run for trustee. She did a remarkable job ... [She] has gone on to the Board of the [municipality's] Social Development Council (field notes, 10/18/95).

" **Reinforcement of confidence in participant s own abilities.**

Some residents just needed some time to become comfortable in the Better Beginnings environment, and a little bit of encouragement, to reinforce their confidence.

I told myself that by getting involved, I would get in the system, get one foot in the door. I could ask questions without having people look at me , . . . because people would think: Ah, she works with Better Beginnings , that s why she asks questions!.

I realized that I could sit on almost any committee meeting and have an opinion. But at first, one (parent) would say, "The other people, they know that," just because they were a professional. But later on, we realized that if they were professional and they had a degree, it didn't mean they knew this . . . (parent s comments, 1997).

" **A sense of independence, assertiveness and awareness of resources and rights**

Building an Awareness of Resources and Becoming Independent. A number of participants indicated that they had gained greater knowledge about community resources that were available to them and to their children. They learned how to identify their needs and to seek help. Staff personally worked with many residents in order to make them more aware of the resources available to them. Once staff saw that residents were comfortable enough to seek out and use the resources themselves, they encouraged residents to be assertive and try to be independent. Many residents just needed a little support in the beginning; Better Beginnings was there to provide essential tools to eventually allow participants to

function independently and to use the resources in their communities.

They told me that when my daughter turns 5 years old I can't be involved in the Family Visitor program anymore. So what my Family Visitor is doing is that she's trying to show me all the services that are around in the area so that I'll know them and be able to use them myself when I'm out of the program. . . . Having a Family Visitor has helped my kids, but it has also made me more confident to do things by myself. Like this afternoon I'll be going alone to the doctor's with my son. (June 1997)

Becoming More Assertive. The increase in confidence and self-esteem that participants experienced also led to their acting more assertively with agencies, as well as in their personal life. Before becoming involved with Better Beginnings, some residents felt they were being taken advantage of and they did not have the courage to say no, even though they were already feeling overwhelmed. Participants mentioned that, as part of their learning to be more assertive, they also learned the ability to ask for and accept help when needed.

At the beginning, the building was falling apart and Housing wasn't doing anything. My kids have asthma and the paint was coming off and cracking. . . . I guess working for Better Beginnings gave me the courage to go. . . . By working for them I learned that you do have a right to go to housing and tell them you have the right to fix something you rent. . . . When before, you know, I used to think that this is subsidized housing and I'm just glad that I have this place and I never thought to like to go to them and tell them and say, "Look you don't do this, I'm going to do this!" Better Beginnings gave me the courage to know that I can do it. My place is better than it was before.

Positive Relationships with Service Providers and Community Institutions. In addition to giving residents the opportunity to get to know their neighbours, Better Beginnings also brought residents into closer contact with other service providers in the community. Residents now have a better knowledge of the various agencies, as well as the confidence to discuss their problems as they arise. Rather than just receiving services from agencies, residents and service representatives now collaborate on a more equal basis.

We've got better relations with agencies and there's been a whole lot of difference in the neighbourhood now people know there's places they can go, there's people they can talk to and then those people can put them where they need to go or who they have to talk to. . . . When they see somebody from welfare sitting at the same table with you, they've proven that they're ordinary people. They're just like you and I and they have a job to do.

" **Development of positive social skills, life skills and communication skills**

Through their volunteer work for the project, many residents have enhanced their life skills.

[Interviewer: What did you learn from doing the Needs Assessment?] I really learned to talk to people. I was afraid because when you don't know how to approach people you don't know how to talk to them. I learned that there's nothing to be afraid of. You have to try and you can do it. I think I learned that. If you want to do it, you can do it.

" **Feeling worthwhile, valuable and important**

A number of residents expressed feeling worthwhile, valuable and important. It appears that no matter what state their life was in, the experiences they had through Better Beginnings made these residents feel important. Many were given the task of sharing their knowledge and expertise about their own experiences, promoting and representing the project to the outside community, planning and implementing events and activities, and listening to others who were experiencing difficulties in their lives. The positive effects of realizing that residents had something of value to contribute to the project and the community were extraordinary.

(T)here was a group of people that were in from another organization and they asked me to come and speak as a parent about the project and that was very flattering. . . . I had the privilege of showing these people the whole centre, . . . so all this sort of thing was really rewarding for me. I actually was becoming known in the project and that was really nice.

" **Becoming a better person**

Several residents spoke of the positive changes they noticed in themselves as a result of their involvement with Better Beginnings.

I have become a healthier, stronger parent and all around a much better person. I have had the confidence and the skills needed to apply for and receive a part-time position with the Better Beginnings project . . . (field notes 02/02/96).

" **Feelings of empowerment on a personal and community level**

As a result of their involvement, residents gained a sense of power as individuals, as well as a community as a whole. This empowerment developed over time as residents began to feel comfortable at meetings and started expressing their opinions, had opportunities to get involved in decision-making, and felt that they were being taken seriously by others in the project. Once residents felt that they had the power to influence important decisions that would affect them or the community, they began to play a more active role in lobbying for the project and taking on more ownership of it.

The community I live in has become closer. . . . I have become empowered to be an active community resident. I feel that I can approach teachers and community agency personnel with confidence and composure.

" **Sense of life purpose and sense of identity through self-discovery**

One of the ways in which residents experience personal growth is through the development of their personal identity, often through a process of self-discovery. Many have realized they enjoy who they really are; it just took someone else to listen to them before they recognized the special qualities within themselves.

I find that BB places a lot of emphasis on the woman, the joy of being a woman and solidarity between women. I like being a woman, and I have shared my femininity. I've lived it fully between women who understand. We have enough negative messages in our society. And I find that BB beautifies the image of the woman. I have really enjoyed being a mother, being Mommy, being a woman (May 1997).

" **Satisfaction gained from helping others**

Many residents got involved with the project because they saw an opportunity to help others, and the sense of satisfaction these residents gained from helping others in turn made them feel better about themselves.

Through helping other families, I feel better about myself. Being able to offer the support I personally needed before has helped me personally.

" **Greater political awareness and involvement**

Residents often became more politically aware and sometimes heavily involved as a result of their participation in the project. Having seen staff advocating for the project, residents eventually took on this role themselves and realized they too could fight for changes.

Before being involved with Better Beginnings, you would have to give me a hint if you asked me who the Prime Minister was. I mean, I was just so uninvolved; . . . nothing that was happening in the government was affecting me. But through them [Better Beginnings] it kind of opened up my eyes and helped me realize that I can participate in the outcome of my future.

Through their political involvement, some residents gained insight into the broad social factors that influenced their lives and those of the people around them, and this resulted in an even deeper sense of commitment and the desire to see some changes.

Doing public speaking, like to the Premier of Ontario . . . As I got to learn more about how political the lives of people are who are living in poverty, the more I wanted to do something to try and change that.

There s another meeting called Community Voices where we have a group of residents who are learning about the political system, and how to . . . go out and talk for themselves . . . (staff focus group).

Learning Opportunities, Training, and Re-entry into the Workforce

Residents involved in Better Beginnings have learned a variety of skills through their participation with the project. Some residents got involved in public speaking while promoting the project, new immigrants were able to improve their English skills informally, and many participants developed enough employment skills to be hired by the project or to seek employment elsewhere.

" **Building competencies and learning organizational and leadership skills**

Many residents became involved in public speaking, had opportunities to engage in decision making, attended training sessions, and gained work experience. These were new experiences to most residents and many appreciated the opportunities to develop their organizational, leadership and communication skills.

It's like going to college, . . . it's hands-on experience. Most people who go to college can get the theory part of it, you know, just theory, but . . . hands-on is just, just so different, and, to me, I received a college degree in terms of the skills I learned, you know: chairing

committees, writing letters, . . . going to events and meetings and actually making presentations, so it improves your speaking skills, takes away your fear to talk . . . to a large crowd, and knowing, . . . regardless of how many people are sitting out there looking at you, you can handle this. . . . It was a job, it really was a job. . . . The benefits and the rewards, better than the job. I don't think I . . . would have learned all I learned had I gone to college for that four years. . . . And also, the more you learn, the more you feel capable, because I went back and took many workshops.

" Development of public speaking skills

Public speaking provoked anxiety in residents as much as it does to anyone else. But staff had confidence in residents to promote the project in the best way they could. This support allowed residents to engage in speaking to the public, and, over time, it has become second nature to these participants. In the process, residents realized how powerful their input can be if they have the courage to stand up to politicians and tell them what they do or do not support.

[E]ach time [speaking in public] is getting better and better. . . . I used to hate stuff like this, . . . but I felt kind of good last week when I did the debate, and I thought, you know, there's no way if Onward Willow hadn't got me used to doing this public speaking, . . . if it hadn't been for that, I wouldn't have been able to debate the same way.

" Home Visitor training opens up employment opportunities

Home visitor training, in particular, benefited participants because participants built up their strengths in order to be competent on the job. In fact, one participant's experience was so positive that she decided to make a career out of that type of work and went back to school.

[T]here was a lot of training that went on for the home visitors and whatever areas were our weaknesses, Onward Willow provided the training to build up our strengths. . . . But learning all this stuff, it was like gates had been opened, you know, and it was time for me to pass through those gates. So I decided that as much as I enjoyed my job as a home visitor, I wanted to learn more, so I resigned as a home visitor and was accepted at the Social Service Worker Program and I went to school for two years and just recently finished in April. So that came as a result of what I was doing as a home visitor, because I wanted to do my job better. I wanted to do it on a more professional basis because I was only a lay person. I was trained informally and using some of my own life experiences and that sort of thing, but I wanted to do more.

" Improved work skills and encouragement from staff allow for further career and educational development

Receiving support to learn and grow on the job has encouraged participants who were thinking about going back to school or work but were not confident enough about their skills to do it on their own.

In August, I applied for a job with [name of agency]. It took me a week and a half to decide to apply. . . . I have found that with Better Beginnings, I had reached a stage in my life where I needed more challenge. Then it took me a week and a half before deciding if I was going to meet this challenge; to decide to take this chance or let it go. I decided to take it, and I haven't regretted my decision ever since. At my new job, I can say that up to now the experience I acquired with Better Beginnings helped me. When

you apply for a job like that, you need some experience. There are too many people and too much competition nowadays, too many individuals with extensive backgrounds to be hired without having experience (a parent and former project employee, 1997).

" **Creation of jobs through Better Beginnings**

Many residents who began their involvement as volunteers were eventually employed in a variety of jobs, including home visitor, research assistant, and teacher's aid. For some people, this income was much needed, but for others it was also a recognition of their capabilities and a fulfillment of their dreams to do work they've always wanted to be involved in, and Better Beginnings allowed them to have this opportunity. Some employees are willing to put extra time into the project because they know it benefits their community.

I'd never have thought that six years later [i.e., six years after her initial involvement with the project] it would be me that would be hired. Wow! Something I can do. And then, really, I'm not so bad at it. I have a lot of fun! Now, I'm [formally recognized as the person] in charge of what I do.

" **Training promoted persistence**

Volunteers and paid staff have had opportunities to gain work skills, but, more importantly, they learned the value of perseverance and commitment.

I started off as a volunteer so I didn't just like jump in and just start working and get paid. I started from volunteering. I was just, you know, helping out and then they said, "Hey! You're doing such a good job, why don't you see if you could get paid by [student training program]?" And I said, okay. So . . . the job wasn't handed to me, I had to work my way to it, so in the future that's always going to be there saying, "Hey! Remember when you got the job at PFBB? You had to WORK for it." So, in other words, don't quit and always keep trying 'cause when you try you know you put effort into it and then you know you deserve that award at the end instead of something just being handed to you and you didn't work for it—it's just given to you.

BENEFITS TO SCHOOL

School and Community Are More Integrated

Resident involvement has also had a positive impact on a school in which one of the Better Beginnings projects is housed. The school and community became more integrated, allowing for the development of closer relationships and opening up communication between teachers, parents and the community.

[The] school has really opened up its doors to the community because of Better Beginnings being around. The school would have been more secluded from the community. . . . Now it's wide open and it's more used, and I think people in the community are feeling now more pulled to the school. It's not off limits. It's a space they can share and access. . . . [The] school [is] more accessible to parents and residents. . . . [The] school is nothing like it used to be prior to Better Beginnings . . . (field notes 10/18/95).

Teachers and Community Members Are Communicating

Teachers have also gained an understanding of their community as a result of their involvement in Better Beginnings committees, which many parents attend.

Better Beginnings has given teachers an opportunity to see themselves in a different role in relationship to the community, and teachers have a better sense of community because they're going on committees with other parents . . . (field notes 10/18/95).

Parents Feel Welcomed in the School

The school is no longer a place where parents are uncomfortable. They now feel more integrated into the school and confident in expressing their opinions.

Parents feel welcomed and feel part of the school. Would challenge any school to the number of parents who said that they feel welcomed . . . (field notes 02/23/95).

BENEFITS TO BETTER BEGINNINGS PROJECT

Volunteers Free up Staff Time and Make More and Better Quality Programs a Possibility

Since the residents who help to create programs have more invested in them, they also play a greater role in developing and running the programs. This gives staff time to plan and administer the programs, and to spend their time communicating with parents and helping them. The volunteer time also results in more programs and events that would not have been possible without those volunteers.

I think with residents involved in any program or any event that we do, I think it allows for us to have, not less to do but less burden on our shoulders, so therefore allowing us to have an even better program . . . (staff focus group).

In the kindergarten classes they never went on trips, and now they have three trips planned for the year because they have the volunteers (staff focus group).

Residents Know Needs of Community, Which Results in Successful Programs

Residents at most sites are extensively involved in the planning of project activities and events. The ideas for new programs often begin with the residents, and since they are experts in the needs of their communities, programs that are coordinated by staff and residents seem to be more successful. One site reported that this results in "programming that always fits much like a tailored suit" (O, p. 9). Much programming is participant-controlled, since residents request programs that would fill their needs, and sites usually try to provide such programs.

I think for a long time . . . we pushed for the Breakfast Program and now it is here and we're saying, "see, it's successful." . . . So I think the parents have stuck around to finally see the benefits of saying, "We need a Breakfast Program, we need a Breakfast Program." And now we have one here and it's benefitting the project and the teachers are liking it . . . (parent focus group).

The aerobics is one of them. The ballet, for little kids. Two of the programs that have gotten provisions for, and how that works is that somebody will come to me and say, "Can you do this?" And I will say, "Well, for you? Or do you know of other people that would want this program?" And they'd say yes. They'd go away and . . . I would get a list of all the people who want the program, so that then we'd know that there is a need (staff focus group).

Since residents are experts in the needs of the community, programs developed by residents themselves actually result in better attendance.

Another benefit of resident participation in program planning is well-attended programs. The PEAS Group and the Community Drop-in are good examples of this. Both of these programs were built based on gathering residents together and asking them what they wanted the program to look like. The result was consistently good attendance.

Enhanced Program Relevance and Organization

In all the sites, resident involvement was seen as crucial in developing programs that were relevant to the needs of the community. Without resident input, programs might have never gotten off the ground or might not have been as effective. Therefore, one of the most important contributions to the project has been residents' knowledge of their community and what kind of programs would be effective in that community.

It has ensured that our work is relevant to the needs of the community. In all levels (staff, volunteers, etc.), we have a strong community voice—parents who know what the challenges and needs are.

Organization Stays Accountable

Resident involvement has ensured that the project as an organization stays accountable for the programs it offers and the way in which it operates.

Community residents know what their community needs. PFBB has taken full advantage of expert input. [Resident participation has helped PFBB] by keeping the organization accountable to the communities it serves, visible, and recognized.

Project is Held in High Regard in the Community

The outside community holds the program in high regard. Many residents were given the opportunity to make presentations about the project to politicians, teachers, and other professionals, which had a very positive effect on how the project was perceived in the community.

Another thing we rely a lot on residents for, again back to the advocacy stuff where we, a lot of people have developed the skills to go out and do the public speaking stuff, talking to politicians, and other groups about what the project does. So right now, this project is held in high regard—one of the reasons for high parent or resident involvement, left, front and centre. That we have taken the 51 percent [i.e., a decision to have at least 51% of all committees be comprised of residents], even though we may not have 51 percent in some of our committees, we're still make sure that residents are [prominent] in all of the committees and really and truly have a voice . . . (staff focus group).

Other Benefits

The collaborative relationship between staff and residents has resulted in the creation of an environment built on trust, which helps the project quickly build trust in the community. One site spoke about using the trusting relationship as a promotional tool to draw new participants to the project. Staff's efforts to nurture the talents of community residents are partly responsible for residents taking on a greater ownership of the project, which benefits the project in the end since staff can concentrate more on providing essential services. Resident involvement has also benefited the project because staff are educated about different cultures in the community, more skills are brought to committees, and the project's mandate for working with the community is fulfilled. Staff are also satisfied by the fact that residents show their support for Better Beginnings programs.

BENEFITS TO COMMUNITY

Through their involvement and experiences at Better Beginnings, residents act as role models for others, influence other agencies, and advocate for all community residents. Through the development of a belief that the community could be a better place, the physical safety and appearance of the community has improved, and community residents now feel more responsibility for community members and problems.

Residents as Role Models

Children and the community have benefited from seeing involved residents model positive behaviours. Parents were also happy that they learned how to be better role models for their children.

One dad noted that the many community improvements increase the local kids' pride in an otherwise pejoratively labeled neighbourhood. He also noted that, because of his involvement in the project, he is now helping kids in the community who are not directly involved (they're older than the target group). As a result, these children and adolescents are learning that some adults can and do care and can listen without judging them.

All Residents Benefit From Social Action

Some of Better Beginnings, Better Futures communities have experienced changes that resulted from residents coming together to take action for needed services and programs. As a result of residents taking responsibility for social action within the project, the community benefits from improvements, such as a four-way stop sign and meal programs, that residents have fought for.

Participants noted that there have been many improvements to the community as the result of Better Beginnings. These include tangible things such as a four-way stop, meal programs, food box, parties and trips.

We're a much stronger community, much stronger. I mean we've done endless things. [One of the Better Beginnings residents], there, she gets people to go around and get petitions and things from the city council. We have that four-way stopping flashing light at the bottom of the hill. A little boy [had been] killed here. We have our other stop signs and things too. We've gone out there and fought for it. We fought for our community but it also hits the press and it's been done. Better Beginnings did it right.

Resident Influence on Other Agencies

Through their experience in dealing with agencies within the project, many residents have learned that they can also influence other agencies. The standards set by Better Beginnings have now become standards that residents believe all agencies should follow, and they are not afraid to ask them to.

"Through my involvement with Better Beginnings I joined an introductory panel at the [local] Hospital in 1991 and got very involved in obstetrics. I assisted in the renovation of the floor, became Chair of the Maternal and Newborn Program Community Advisory Panel, and I am an active member of the Neighbourhood Relations committee, which has a great influence to the Board of the Hospital, much like the Better Beginnings Parent Group did. Through the hospital, I was contacted to do consulting for the Health Canada Family Centred Care Maternal and Newborn Guidelines for Health professionals, and give my feedback and ideas from a "consumer" perspective. This was an enjoyable experience, as I was one of the only consumers ever to have an impact on such material.

Development of a Belief that the Community Can Change for the Better

Many residents have seen the reopening of parks that were once considered unsafe and now are busy leisure parks, and they attribute this to the project's efforts to improve the community. This has influenced residents' beliefs about their community in a positive way.

Better Beginnings has helped people to believe in their community. A number of respondents noted that the North End of Kingston has been given a number of negative labels and this contributed to people feeling ashamed of their community and hopeless about change. Likewise, residents had seen several organizations come and go and were skeptical about the possibility of change. With Better Beginnings, people believed that the community could be different.

One long time-member of the project remembers how encouraging it was to participate in the Vision Day. She remembers that you couldn't tell the difference between the community and agency people.

Decreased Use of the Welfare System

While some residents who are on welfare increased their feelings of worthiness as a result of the opportunities Better Beginnings has provided, others have decided to get off welfare altogether after realizing they can contribute to the workforce in a meaningful way.

Being involved with Better Beginnings has made me more confident, has given me self-esteem. Even if Better Beginnings is gone, I'll have a job. I won't go on welfare anymore (March 1997).

Malnutrition and Cases of Abuse are Recognized and Acted Upon

As part of feeling a greater sense of responsibility toward their community, residents and staff keep an open eye for problems families may be having and ensure that these problems are dealt with immediately, and, ideally, prevented in the future.

There have been some changes in the community. People aren't getting away with things, like if they see kids getting abused, BB will make sure that the right people are

contacted. Or if they're not being fed, there's more help, with them being there. Before, nobody really cared, they never did anything (June 1997).

Improvement in Physical Appearance of Community

Residents spoke about the communities' cleaner physical appearance, and felt this was partly due to Better Beginnings initiatives and partly due to the residents' greater sense of ownership and pride in their communities.

I think one of the things that is evident almost immediately is the recognition that this is our home. We, as members of the community, live here; . . . this is our home. Respect for the physical community, the fact we've planted gardens, flowers and that we've been able to renovate [the local park] by putting in walkways, trees and that kind of thing, is the first evidence that people feel at home. . . . People have gotten together and raised issues . . . to preserve green space in the community . . .

Sense of Safety and Security

Several residents felt that their communities had become more safe and secure places for themselves and their children.

I think people feel safer too with Better Beginnings here. The Project Coordinator has a big part in that, because she did a lot of work with getting the police to come into the community and work with the kids. I guess the more the people get to know each other, the more they feel safe, too.

Residents are More Comfortable Actively Dealing with Agencies

Residents are confident and comfortable in dealing with community agencies as a result of their involvement in the project.

It's made me feel more comfortable, like getting, being involved in the school with . . . the teacher, because we . . . parents are able to be in the school.

Sense of Community, Belonging and Openness to Experience

For many residents, the benefit of participating in the project has been a reduction in their social isolation, and the development of a social support network that was almost non-existent before they became involved. Over time, community residents began to feel a sense of connection with other residents and the larger community, began to take pride in their community, and developed a sense of ownership and responsibility for their neighbourhood. The supportive and nonjudgmental environment promoted by Better Beginnings also resulted in staff and residents learning about and accepting different cultures and personalities.

" Reduction in social isolation, boredom, loneliness and fear

Several residents spoke about the friendships they had made through their participation, and how Better Beginnings helped to break the isolation they had experienced. Better Beginnings sites maintain an open door policy, in which anyone can drop in and immediately experience a break from their isolation.

Better Beginnings offers the community a break from their isolation. [I m] no longer isolated, there is always a playgroup or something going on that you could be involved with to have a voice in your community.

[If it were not for the project] I wouldn't have any friends, I wouldn't have a working group. . . . I'd be lost, maybe I wouldn't be here anymore.

" **Increase in social support through development and enhancement of support networks**

The opportunity to meet other residents was another benefit of participation. As a result of meeting so many people through Better Beginnings, residents feel tied to the people they have met and to their community. The social contact offered by Better Beginnings was a way to expand their social network, make friends, and have someone to do things with. Some residents saw their friends as sources of support and help if the need arose. Many felt that the friends they met could be considered as extended family.

As for me, the best part was meeting all these nice people in the community. Before I was involved, I lived here for 13 years and didn't even know as many people as I got to know in the two years since I've been involved. These are the best friends I ever knew. I'm not involved anymore in Onward Willow, but I still come and see all my friends. This is the best community I've ever lived in. I've lived in several cities for over 25 years, and, in my opinion, this is the best place.

Through volunteering in the kitchen, you meet other parents and are able to provide support to one another. . . . We support each other. We love each other . . . (field notes, 01/09/95).

" **Sense of ownership and responsibility for community**

Residents that become involved in the project have developed a sense of ownership and responsibility for their community, which has influenced the decision making for the project. Rather than considering themselves or the project in isolation, residents make decisions that are best for the community as a whole.

Some things are better now. . . . Parents take responsibility for other people's children . . . We [made a difficult decision] because it was the best for the neighbourhood, not because it was up to us personally. . . . [In the future] I can see me still working with these people and looking for more funding and just trying to help a lot more people get through the way I did . . .

" **Community is a good place to live**

While many Better Beginnings communities have had pejorative labels, over time there has been a complete turnaround. Some residents have become so attached to the community that they have moved back to the neighbourhood after being away for a while.

I'm not going to let this fall by the wayside, as I've seen too many changes. Too many positive changes. Big changes in the community. People stand up in front of groups of people, and television, or anything else, and we are proud of our community. We like living here; people don't want to move out. In fact, people who had moved out have moved back now. They want to be in Better Beginnings, they want to be part of what's happening.

" **Greater sense of connection among community residents**

Many residents felt a greater sense of connection with other people in the community and attributed this sense of connection to the presence of Better Beginnings.

It's a lot quieter and people are pretty respectful. And we know each other, like I know a fair amount of people around here. If they need stuff, they can come here or if they need help they can go to Onward Willow. . . . There's a connection. If people have problems, they can phone and have people to talk to. . . . You'll drive by a house for sale and you'll think, "That's a nice house for sale," and then I'll go, but it's not in the Better Beginnings neighbourhood and I really don't want to leave, because it's working so well here . . .

There's definitely been lots of changes here. It's a lot quieter, people are talking to their next-door neighbours no matter what race they are. I have participants that are visiting with their neighbours no matter what race they are; . . . visiting with their neighbours and they never would have before. Last year, we had a potluck here at the Community Centre put on by Better Beginnings and the Tenants Association. And we had one family who came over for the potluck, that had lived here for eight years, and that was the first time they ever set foot in the Community Centre. I was on the association and I could never get them out to anything, but they came to this potluck! It was amazing! I think that's because Better Beginnings is around, and people know it. I think people are getting really connected.

" **Understanding and acceptance of different people, personalities, cultures**

A supportive, respectful, nonjudgmental, nonracial environment is promoted at Better Beginnings projects. This has had a great impact on the views of many residents about people from cultures other than their own. Residents talked about this impact as if Better Beginnings had broken barriers that previously precluded them from relating in any way with people of other cultures. Both staff and community members learned to have patience, to be empathetic and understanding, to have an appreciation of other cultures, and to accept others as people like themselves. It appears this change in attitude toward other cultures would never have occurred for most people if they did not have encounters with those of other cultures in an environment like Better Beginnings. Some residents felt so supported by the people they have met through Better Beginnings that they consider these people as their extended family.

Maybe I was a little racist before. Maybe it scared me, and when you go to the Community Centre and they are there, they give you a little smile and they don't know how to talk to you, it's less scary. I know their culture, I heard them talk, I know the problems that they have, so I'm less tempted to judge them. I'm even tempted to have discussions with them and meet them. I find that a program like that mixes up the cultures well. It's less difficult to cross the bridge it's like it breaks the barriers.

" **Development of a better understanding and respect for community**

Some residents had previously had little contact with their neighbours and the community, and their involvement in the project helped them to realize how others saw the community. This fostered a better understanding of and respect for the community.

In the springtime I did the whole needs assessment thing. It was good to knock on doors and talk to people. I would never think that we're going to sit here for three hours with a

group of people fixing the questions and then going out. It took a lot of time but I think you get to see how people in the same community see the community in such a different light. How could I, who live in Apartment X, and someone who lives in Apartment Y, perceive this place as so different?

LESSONS LEARNED

- " The involvement of neighbourhood residents in developing, implementing and publicizing programs is crucial to ensure that programs meet the needs of the community and have high levels of participation. Participation of residents can be enhanced by providing childcare for those attending meetings, by providing food or snacks, or by other means that make participation comfortable for those who come out.
- " Programs need to be responsive to community wants and needs. Listening to the community and acting quickly to serve them can have a positive effect on program participation. Some of the most heavily used programs have been ones that were requested by the community.
- " Community members need to give a long-term commitment to the program, because lasting, meaningful change takes time.
- " Recruiting parent volunteers is essential to the success of the program. All of the project coordinators felt that the parent volunteers were vital to the project.
- " Hiring resident parents can increase the programs success because those parents are sensitive to the community needs, they can relate to the different ethnic groups, and they seem to elicit greater levels of trust and participation from the community.
- " Having teenagers as volunteers and paid employees in the program is beneficial because they develop bonds with others outside their age group and it allows the community to see the teens in a positive light. This contributes to the community's feelings of safety.
- " However, residents should be hired on the basis of their skills, not just because they have experience living in the community.
- " Regular consultation with the community is vital for program design, implementation, and evaluation. The volunteers who sit on the committees know what the community needs and will ensure that the programs continue to meet the needs of the families in the neighbourhood.
- " It is important to thank volunteers for all of their hard work. Recognition dinners and honorariums are effective ways of showing appreciation to residents.
- " Meetings and events should be less formal and more social to be welcoming to community residents; having food and "treats" is one important way of providing a more social atmosphere and promoting a sense of community.
- " The kind and degree of benefit that residents experienced appeared to relate to the type and level of their involvement. Individuals who participated in the planning and development of programs as members of steering and working groups, who were hired as program staff, or who had spoken on behalf of their project to outside audiences, were the ones who appeared to derive the greatest benefit.