

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK BE BACK SOON – PANDEMIC IMPACT

Connections Early Years Family Centre
Windsor, ON

Area of Practice:

Services and Supports for Vulnerable Immigrant Groups

Video:

<https://youtu.be/qvm6X3KAN5I>

A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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**PATHWAYS TO
PROSPERITY**
Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada



**VOIES VERS LA
PROSPÉRITÉ**
Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE ORGANIZATION

Connections Early Years Family Centre is a non-profit agency that offers a variety of free services to support the healthy development of families with children 0-6 years old in Windsor-Essex County. To accomplish this, the Centre offers the following programs: EarlyON Centre, Preschool Speech and Language Program, Infant Hearing Program, Blind/Low Vision Program, Ontario Autism - Caregiver Mediated Early Years Program, and Be Back Soon.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

Be Back Soon

Brief Description of the Program Prior to the Pandemic:

Since 2005, the Be Back Soon program has been offering no-cost, unlicensed short-term child care for families living with low income. The program provides a safe and stimulating environment for children between 0 and 6 years old so that they can play and learn while their parents attend appointments, workshops or job interviews. Child care is provided by Registered Early Childhood Educators and supervised volunteers. Prior to the pandemic, the program was available in 2.5-hour time blocks throughout the week.

Description of the Changes to the Program Since the Pandemic Began:

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many programs to switch from in-person to virtual interaction. However, given that the core of the Be Back Soon program has always been child care, a virtual format for the Be Back Soon program was not possible. For this reason, the Be Back Soon program explored various methods to stay connected to the families it serves. This included adding phone and Zoom calls to the program. Staff contacted the registered families to check on them and to ask if the Be Back Soon program could support them in any way. The goal was not to offer counselling or mental health services. Instead, the goal was to connect with the families, and to offer support. For example, the support provided included the sharing of songs, stories and other engagement methods for children. Staff also created packages with activities for families that they could pick up at the Centre. For some families, packages were also delivered to them directly. For other needs, Be Back Soon staff also provided referrals to other agencies.

Once COVID-19 restrictions began to ease, the Be Back Soon program gradually reopened its child care service under strict health and safety guidelines. The program has also become more flexible in terms of the hours of operation. While prior to the pandemic the program was available for five days a week for 2.5 hours time periods, the program is now available 24/7 whenever possible.

In 2021, once vaccines became available, Be Back Soon was approached by its funder to ask if the program could provide vaccination support to families in specific neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods were often lower income neighbourhoods with newcomer families. As a result, Be Back Soon partnered with the local health unit, the Downtown Windsor Business Improvement Association (DWBIA) and the municipality to deliver vaccination support. This included child care so that parents could make it to their vaccine appointments, language translations, transportation, and neighbourhood vaccine clinics.

Goal(s) of the Program Since the Pandemic Began:

The primary goal of the program did not change. The primary goal is to provide support to low-income families by offering child care while parents attend appointments that benefit the health of their family. These may include, for example, employment, medical, or personal appointments.

Once the program resumed in person, it also paid particular attention to making the children and parents feel comfortable and safe enough to use the service. This was especially relevant given that many of the parents had not left their children anywhere during the pandemic. Another more specific goal has become to increase the number of people getting vaccinated against COVID-19 by removing as many barriers as possible (e.g., by providing child care, transportation, etc.).

Target Client Group(s):

Prior to the pandemic, the families who attended the Be Back Soon program were those who met the annual low-income threshold. During the pandemic and when the program started to offer vaccination support, the program also became available to those who live in targeted neighbourhoods. Often, these two groups are the same families and consist of single parents, often women, who are marginalized and/or racialized newcomers.

Delivery Partners:

Connections Early Years Family Centre is the sole agency that delivers the Be Back Soon program. However, the program relies on partner agencies to make referrals and support families to use the program, as well as on other groups to complement the service. For example, the Downtown BIA covers the travel costs for family members' trips from the Connections Early Years Family Centre to vaccine clinics.

Human Resources:

The Be Back Soon program continues to be delivered by Registered Early Childhood Educators and volunteers. However, due to the more flexible hours of operation, the staff had to become more flexible in their schedules and work non-traditional hours.

Funding:

The Be Back Soon program is funded by the City of Windsor through the Pathway to Potential Social Investment Plan.

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

Several features of the program contribute to its effectiveness. One of the features is that Registered Early Childhood Educators are responsible for providing child care. In other words, the staff are qualified and understand the needs of the children, their development, and how to help them overcome trauma, if needed. Another feature contributing to the program's effectiveness is that it is offered at no cost to the families. Also, the program is flexible and attempts to provide child care whenever the parents need it to attend an appointment.

Efficient:

The Be Back Soon program has been running for many years. There is a clear understanding of how to best run the day-to-day operations. For example, staff complete all the paperwork with the parents before the actual child care appointment. Staff also ask parents about the children's needs, medical information, and likes and dislikes in advance. In this way, when parents drop off their children, the staff is prepared for each child and the focus is just on dropping off the child, providing care, and picking up the child.

Relevant:

The program has always been relevant to the families who have no one to care for their children while they attend appointments. Families who participate in the program frequently report that they are not able to access employment interviews and medical appointments because they have nobody to watch their children. Currently, the program also supports individuals to get their COVID-19 vaccine.

Sustainable:

In the future, the Be Back Soon program will continue to work to reach the target goals set by the funder. It will also continue to have flexible hours of operation and to connect with families not just in person but also by phone. The program is also planning to connect with agencies that help newcomer and low-income families to find housing. These agencies could inform these families about Be Back Soon, so that parents could drop off their children at the program while they look for housing. Finally, the Connections Early Years Family Centre is involved in continuous advocacy, with the hope that this type of child care could eventually be provided in other communities as well.

Transferable:

In order to successfully replicate the program, a strong knowledge of child care and early learning is needed so that a safe and stimulating environment can be provided to the children. The qualified staff should also be empathetic and supportive to families. This also includes flexibility so that child care can be provided whenever the families need it. Additional requirements include a clean environment, as well as funding for staffing, materials and promotion. Finally, it is also helpful to establish community partnerships. For example, Be Back Soon partnered with a taxi company to offer transportation to those families who did not have a bus pass or had other transportation difficulties. During the pandemic, Be Back Soon also partnered with the local health unit, which provided guidance regarding good health and safety practices.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

Unlike traditional child care programs, Be Back Soon is a very flexible child care program that allows parents to drop off their children whenever they need without having to commit to a regular schedule and fee. This is particularly helpful for families who do not know anyone who can look after their children while they attend an appointment. Instead of having to ask someone who lives down the street, parents can rely on the Be Back Soon program where children receive safe and stimulating child care. It is a simple program with great social impact.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

Compared to the pre-pandemic Be Back Soon program, the current Be Back Soon program has been recognized as playing a role in the health of the community on another level. The program has become even more responsive/flexible to the needs of the families it serves.

High Client Uptake:

The Be Back Soon program continues to have high client uptake. Families are recruited through social media, word-of-mouth, partner agencies, the website, flyers/posters and paid advertising. Ontario Works and the local health unit also make referrals.

High Client Retention:

Families have been found to use the Be Back Soon program multiple times. They also share their positive experiences with the program with their friends, who then in turn also use the program.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

In 2021, 404 adults (parents/guardians) were enrolled in the program. Of these, 364 adults made use of the program, which corresponds to a total of 448 children served. Of the individuals served, 48 adults and 67 children were new in 2021.

Parents report that the program is very helpful for them and their children. They appreciate the safe environment and the educational activities for their children. Parents use the program to attend different kinds of appointments, such as job interviews, legal appointments, medical appointments, including vaccinations, and driver license tests. The children leave the Centre with smiles on their faces and indicate that they would like to return to play.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

Performance outcomes are measured and documented in two ways: 1) By recording the number of people who use the program, and 2) by seeking qualitative feedback from families. Qualitative feedback is sought from parents at two different points in time. After each visit, program staff follow up with the parents to learn whether the program has helped them, and whether the program could be improved in any way. In addition, parent feedback is sought through a bi-annual survey with open-ended questions. In the survey, parents are asked how they heard about the program, how often they used the program, for what purposes they used the program, whether the program met their needs, and whether the program could support them in any other way. Overall, this information provides valuable feedback on the performance of the program. It also helps staff to further improve the program. For example, the change to more flexible hours of operation was informed by parent feedback.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Connections Early Years Family Centre

<https://connectwithus.ca>

Be Back Soon Program

<https://connectwithus.ca/programs/bbs/>

Be Back Soon Testimonial about Free Child Care During Vaccination Appointments

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etvW5ABeOHQ>