

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Alexander Summers, Medical Officer of Health
Emily Williams, Chief Executive Officer

DATE: 2022 June 16

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EARLY YEARS OUTREACH (EYO) INITIATIVE

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive Report No. 39-22, re: “Implementation of the Early Years Outreach (EYO) Initiative” for information.

Key Points

- Early life experiences play an important role in healthy child development and the trajectory of a person’s life course. Supporting early years professionals not only contributes to the well-being of children in their care, but also to the future health and well-being of the entire community.
- The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to implement the Early Years Outreach (EYO) initiative, resulting in strengthened early years sector relationships particularly within the childcare sector.
- Planning is underway to expand and refine the goals of the EYO initiative to include: realigning and enhancing supports through outreach to an expanding early years sector; and supporting MLHU programs and other sectors within London and Middlesex County to consider implications of their work on the lives of children and their families.

Background

Within the Ontario Public Health Standards (2021), healthy growth and development is identified as a key determinant of health, with early life experiences influencing an individual’s school success, economic participation later in life, and their overall physical and mental well-being. There are children in the Middlesex-London region who are exposed to adverse events in their early years such as persistent poverty and unstable relationships. Adverse experiences can impair children’s brain architecture and biological systems, resulting in chronic mental and physical diseases as children transition to adulthood. This imposes significant societal costs with a reduction in the productivity of the workforce and increased incidence of disability, warranting additional medical and social services. Decades of research supports that upstream interventions focused on critical periods in the prenatal and early years are more cost effective and produce more favorable long-term outcomes than remediation later in life.

An internal Healthy Start Growth and Development Review was completed in 2020, resulting in ample evidence that stable and supportive environments for children to live and grow promote healthy development and an ability to adapt to the challenges of everyday life. The review suggested that health promotion interventions focused on augmenting the protective factors that enhance healthy growth and development in early childhood can change the trajectory of children’s lives.

Prior to the creation of the Early Years Outreach (EYO) initiative, public health nurses were actively involved in collective impact work with many early years sector community partners. During the COVID-19 pandemic, MLHU identified a need to provide additional support to the childcare sector, which created an opportunity to enhance the relationship with this group of early years professionals. This led to the implementation of the EYO initiative in early 2021, where a streamlined process was created to coordinate and prioritize the provision of information and support.

Implementation Update

The EYO initiative began with two public health nurses and shortly thereafter a third public health nurse was added when repatriated back from the COVID-19 Team. Attention was focused on childcare centres by providing consistent COVID-19 information and updates. The provincial COVID-19 guidelines for childcare centres were integrated into documents with guidance more related to the school setting; however, because childcare centres are typically independent organizations who primarily care for and educate a much younger population (birth to school entry), centres required additional supports to interpret and implement provincial guidelines. The EYO initiative was instrumental in providing timely and individualized support for each unique organization to remain open as an essential service provider. With the resulting appreciation of public health support, an enthusiastic invitation was issued to participate at more collaborative tables within the early years sector, namely the Licensed Child Care Network (LCCN), the LCCN Advocacy subgroup, and the Middlesex Children's Services Network (MCSN) Recruitment and Retention work group.

As part of the streamlined process, three main strategies were implemented:

1. Creation of a dedicated EarlyYearsOutreach@mlhu.on.ca email as a one-stop vehicle for early years sector community partners to ask public health questions. In 2021, over 550 COVID-19-related email consultations were completed, including an increased number during the summer camp period. Approximately 100 other public health-related issues such as immunization, other infectious diseases, child development, and nutrition were attended.
2. An MLHU EYO e-Newsletter was established. Early years professionals can enrol to receive the e-Newsletter which provides public health information on a variety of topics. The e-Newsletters started with 152 contacts in March 2021 and increased to 206 contacts by the end of December 2021. The e-Newsletters were sent monthly with additional *ad hoc* e-News updates to provide timely COVID-19 information as needed. This resulted in 29 e-Newsletters and e-News updates in 2021 for a total of 4,625 emails. A future goal is to increase collaboration with other MLHU programs to develop content for the e-Newsletters when there is information to share that is relevant to the early years sector.
3. Prioritization of the www.healthunit.com/childcare-educators landing page on the Health Unit website to ensure the availability of up-to-date MLHU information and resources for childcare educators. The webpage also provides access to sign-up for the e-Newsletter, view past e-Newsletter issues, and find links to past EYO webinars, including a well-received webinar provided by Dr. Summers regarding COVID-19 guidance specific for childcare centres. This webpage received over 2,900 page views in 2021, compared to 1,200 page views in 2020.

Next Steps

With the recent restructure of the Healthy Start Division, the EYO initiative is now provided by the newly formed Early Years Community Health Promotion (EYCHP) Team. Program planning is focused on a comprehensive health promotion approach to support healthy child growth and development.

The goals of the EYO initiative were to realign and enhance supports through outreach to an expanding early years sector; and support MLHU programs and other sectors within London and Middlesex County to consider implications of their work on the lives of children and their families. The EYO initiative will continue to create opportunities to influence positive childhood experiences and supportive environments to attain optimal growth and development of children.

This report was submitted by the Healthy Start Division.

Handwritten signature of Alexander T. Summers in black ink.

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