

More support needed for families in province's early learning programs

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Parents are extremely satisfied with early learning programs in Ontario for their children but say more support is needed for families, according to a new report by Ryerson University's Kathryn Underwood, a professor of early childhood education.

When it comes to early learning and child care programs in Ontario, support for families is critical - especially for those with special-needs children, finds a new report from Ryerson University.

"Kindergarten doesn't make up the whole picture of early learning," said Kathryn Underwood, a professor in Ryerson's School of [Early Childhood Education](#). "Communities across Ontario are providing family support for young children and their families through developmental screening, early intervention and community engagement."

Underwood studied parent and family perceptions of the province's Best Start Strategy, a network of early learning and care programs launched in 2004 by the Ontario government. Its goal is to integrate services and ensure that communities have the supports to prepare children for Grade 1, as well as provide early-learning opportunities, and pre- and post-natal support. Her co-investigators are Isabel Killoran, a professor in York University's Faculty of Education, and project coordinator Nina Lee Webster, a PhD student at Brock University.

The researchers used online and mail-in surveys to poll what [parents](#) thought was working best with Best Start programs and services in three pilot communities located in an urban, rural and northern settings in Ontario. The surveys were followed by focus groups and interviews in which parents expanded on their thoughts and identified issues.

Underwood's findings show that parents are extremely satisfied with the quality of the programs and the outcomes for their children, such as [language development](#), social development and preparation for school.

Parents also described several ways in which early learning and childcare programs can better meet families' needs. Suggestions included being more responsive to feedback from parents, providing programming for a broader range of age groups, and giving more support to all family members including fathers and grandparents.

Parents also expressed a need for better accessibility and integration of special-needs programs.

"These programs and services have a strong capacity to support kids with disabilities," said Underwood. "That support can be embedded in the early childhood system, which has many strengths from parents' perspectives."

The study's findings have led to a number of recommendations for future policy planning including more quality childcare spaces; more support programs for parents of children with disabilities; and continued investment in staff members, including fair wages, training opportunities and work environments that encourage employee retention and consistency.

Provided by Ryerson University

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