

Pilot project will help child-care staff support children with special needs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

EDMONTON - A three-year pilot project in five Edmonton-area child-care centres is offering targeted training and more support to staff to better help children with developmental, physical and mental disabilities.

The project was sparked after a University of Alberta researcher published a study that found 36 per cent of surveyed child-care centres and 29 per cent of day homes had turned away children with special needs, many because they had no space, but others because the child needed more help than the staff could handle, staff had inadequate training or the facility wasn't physically accessible for kids in wheelchairs or with other physical disabilities.

The survey also discovered 19 per cent of the child-care centres and 13 per cent of day homes had asked parents to withdraw their children from the program in the last two years because the children were harming other kids, or the staff couldn't provide the needed attention to help with problem behaviours.

"It's really disheartening," said Lesley Wiart, lead author of the study published in the March 7 edition of the *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. Wiart, a pediatric physical therapist, surveyed 318 child-care centres and 25 day homes in Alberta through a mailed questionnaire. While 84 per cent said children without special needs benefited from being in the same child-care programs as those with special needs, that didn't always happen. Between 36 to 40 per cent of the agencies didn't know how to access specialized support services for children. About one-quarter of the facilities reported they didn't have the proper training to deal with complex needs, and one-third felt they didn't have staffing levels that allowed more attention be given to specific kids.

"The intentions are good in terms of they believe in the value of inclusion," said Wiart, who did her research while a doctoral student in nursing at the University of Alberta. "They felt that they required more targeted education and training. ... The type of support they were talking about was on-site coaching and modelling of strategies to support inclusion. ...

"We wanted this research to actually be used."

That's where Barb Reid came in. Reid is the executive director of the not-for-profit program called *Getting Ready for Inclusion Today*, which gives funding to families whose children have been officially diagnosed with attention deficit disorder or autism, among other diagnoses. Reid applied for and received a \$250,000 grant from Alberta Education to introduce a training and coaching program for staff at five child-care centres based on Wiart's research finding.

During weekends and evenings, approximately 120 staff from the MacEwan Child Care Centre, the St. Albert Day Care Society, the Hermitage daycare in Edmonton, the Greenfield centre in Mill Woods and Child Development Dayhomes will receive training on how to help kids with challenging behaviour, Reid said.

"This isn't typical behaviour," Reid said. "This is behaviour that lasts an extended period of time and requires more support and resources and is often connected with children's social and emotional development as opposed to misbehaving."

An expert will first teach the child-care workers strategies beyond the usual problem solving or offering choices when a child is aggressive or has meltdowns, Reid said. That coach then goes into the actual day cares to observe and guide.

Staff, for instance, may be taught what specialized equipment a toddler with cerebral palsy might need to move from a wheelchair to sitting on the carpet during story time so as to be included.

Workers might introduce visual schedules for children, as they did with Sydney Seniuk, who have problems transitioning between activities, such as getting dressed for recess outside. The schedule taught Sydney what to expect during her day, reducing her extreme anxiety that could cause tantrums and aggression.

Christy Raymond-Seniuk, Sydney's mother, said the MacEwan Child Care Centre helped identify Sydney's obsessive-compulsive disorder, problems with anxiety over separation, loud noises and certain sensory issues such as putting on a pair of snow pants. After being diagnosed and given funding for a part-time aide five times a week, Sydney soon learned she had 17 steps to get ready for recess. That calmed her down.

"As a parent, what you want for your child is to integrate and to learn coping skills," Raymond-Seniuk said. Staff with extra training taught

Sydney the fine motor skills to hold a crayon with her fingers. Before, she would grasp them in her entire fist, working out anxiety with scribbling so aggressive she would sometimes break pencils.

"They've set her up for life," said Raymond-Seniuk. Sydney is now five and in kindergarten.

Reid hopes the pilot program will help children who haven't been diagnosed with certain conditions, but need intentional teaching of early skills that don't always come naturally, such as making friends.

"We don't just expect children to have it at age three and four. We're teaching it, we're practising it," Reid said. "(The pilot program) was developed to support those children falling through the gaps. ...

"We'd love a zero rejection of children in learning and care. And that sounds like a hard reach, but if we can't support three-year-olds, who's going to support them when they're eight or 12."

Reid already plans to expand to 10 centres, wants to build leadership teams at each centre to function without coaches, and hopes an inclusion policy is drafted.

Wuart wants the same.

"Sometimes success is walking into a classroom and not knowing who is the child with special needs," Wuart said.

-reprinted from the Edmonton Journal

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