



Project Early Intervention

Introduction

Children and youth are priorities for the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention. Factors such as low family income, poor school performance, parental criminality and exposure to domestic violence can place children at risk of victimization and/or the early onset of criminal behaviour. Under the Safer Communities Initiative, particular attention is being paid to projects that foster community action and promote conditions that help offset these risk factors.

One such effort is Project Early Intervention, launched by the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Police Service in June 2000. The project bears some resemblance to a successful outreach program which operates from the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Police Youth Centre. That initiative began offering after-school and evening sports and recreational programming to teenagers in the 1980s. By contrast, Project Early Intervention

will provide high-quality programming and life skills education opportunities to children ages 6 to 12 who are identified as at risk for criminal behaviour. The goal is to offer options and opportunities for children to develop pro-social attitudes and skills, and the project is built on strong community partnerships among health services agencies, police, schools and businesses.

Earning trust

Project Early Intervention is focussing on an area of Ottawa-Carleton that has very little access to programming for young children. The 'neighbourhood' is a public housing development, where most families have low incomes. There is no local community centre, and the closest community centre has no programming for children ages 6 to 12. The police are called to the area on a regular basis to handle disturbances.

Project Early Intervention will receive three-year funding totalling \$600,000 from the Crime Prevention Investment Fund to cover the costs associated with developing and evaluating a life skills programming component for children. Equipment and space have been donated by a number of organizations. A portable classroom and ball field, for example, have been contributed by the City of Ottawa. In partnership

This publication is part of the Caledon Institute's crime prevention series of community stories, produced in collaboration with the National Crime Prevention Centre. The series documents promising approaches to crime prevention through social development.

with Ottawa Housing, the local tenants' association has made available two adjoining townhouses which will be used as meeting and office spaces. The local elementary school has donated its library and gymnasium for use throughout the year.

“Summer 2000 will give us the chance to pilot test our social skills program component and evaluation tools,” says Project Manager James Tanguay. “Since we’re in the early stages of getting to know the kids and earning their trust, our approach is low-key and ‘kid friendly.’ Once the fall comes, we will have identified the kids we feel can really benefit from more specific programming.”

The social skills pilot program will include role-play activities, videos, discussions and games aimed at teaching children about impulse control, anger management, and con-

flict avoidance and resolution. An evaluation tool has been developed to assess the results of the pilot project, and it will be further refined once the fall programming gets under way. The social skills program will operate alongside sports and recreational programming. James will hire two neighbourhood teenagers as part-time program assistants, and he will rely on them to help identify children at risk.

“The local teens are already asking to get involved in our work,” reports James. “Though our focus is on the younger kids, we won’t ignore the needs and interests of the teens. Right now, we’re getting to know them and directing them to other teen programming. We’re also encouraging them to work with us by providing leadership to the younger kids.”

One staff member has been running ‘sports evenings’ on Mondays and Fridays since

National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention aims to reduce crime and victimization by addressing their root causes through a social development approach. Social development is a long-term, proactive approach directed at removing personal, social and economic factors that lead some individuals to engage in criminal acts or to become victims of crime.

With an investment of \$32 million annually, the National Strategy enables the Government of Canada to help communities develop projects and partnerships that will prevent crime. The strategy focuses particularly on children and youth, Aboriginal people and the personal security of women and girls. It includes the Safer Communities Initiative, a Promotion and Public Education Program and the National Crime Prevention Centre. The National Crime Prevention Centre is responsible for implementing the Strategy.

The Safer Communities Initiative is designed to help Canadians undertake crime prevention activities in their communities. It includes four funding components: the Community Mobilization Program, which helps communities develop approaches to crime prevention and undertake activities that deal with the root causes of crime; the Crime Prevention Investment Fund, which aims to establish reliable information on what works and what is promising in reducing the risk factors associated with crime and victimization; the Crime Prevention Partnership Program, which supports the involvement of organizations that can contribute to community crime prevention through the development of information, tools and resources; and the Business Action Program on Crime Prevention, which involves national and provincial/territorial business and professional associations in helping communities prevent crime, share information and encourage community mobilization.



A 'fun day' was held in June 2000 to launch Project Early Intervention. Here, James Tanguay welcomes people to the event.

the program launch in June. On average, 30 or 40 children come to play, and James is pleased with the turnout. His office is in the neighbourhood and he often shows up at the sports field to play an informal game of basketball or soccer. Gaining trust and making friends are the first key steps.

Leadership and partnership

City of Ottawa Councillor Jim Bickford was instrumental in orchestrating the opening of the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Police Youth Centre in the late 1980s. He feels that the combination of strong leadership, multiple partner involvement and high-quality programming that characterized the first centre's operation will result in successful outcomes for Project Early Intervention.

"I remember playing an intense game of ball hockey with kids at the first centre," says

Jim. "Well into the game, I needed to take a break, so I sat out on the sidelines. A few minutes later, the police leaders came to sit with me, we chatted and the kids stopped playing less than five minutes later. I realized subsequently that it was our presence that made the game enjoyable for those teens. It was our witnessing their plays and encouraging them that made them want to take part. That kind of involvement from committed, supportive adults is one of the key elements that makes this type of programming successful."

Breaking down barriers among neighbourhood residents, social service agencies, educators and local police is another key ingredient in successful community crime prevention strategies. Lyndi McDonald, the principal at the local elementary school, has been supportive of the project since its early planning stages.

"The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board sees this project as a way to work more



Sports are an important component of Project Early Intervention.

closely with social services and the police,” says Lyndi. Staff members at the neighbourhood schools will help Project Early Intervention coordinators to identify students and families they feel could benefit from the program. This type of service coordination will help provide seamless programming for children at risk.

Making a difference

Ottawa-Carleton Regional Police Youth Centre graduates appreciate the choices and opportunities they were offered by centre staff. Rick Pettitt was 13 when the centre first opened and he had a reputation as a troublemaker. Now 23, he recently graduated from a three-year Police Foundations course at a local community college. His experiences doing ridealongs with police officers into city trouble spots convinced him that community intervention programming is critical to developing healthy neighbourhoods.

Says Rick: “My friends and I used to hang around at the local restaurants until we were kicked out. There was nothing to do and nowhere to go. When Claude Turgeon came on as the centre Director, he convinced the city to open up the other side of the building we were using, he organized the kids to fundraise for equipment and programming, and he and another worker actively recruited kids from the neighbourhood. He offered me a job taking coats and answering phones when I was 16, and I continued working there as a program leader until I was about 21. I still drop in to the centre every few days. Everyone knows me, and I’m seen as a role model for the other kids in the neighbourhood.”

Councillor Jim Bickford has seen first-hand the benefits a community realizes by investing in its youth. Says Jim: “Once kids feel they can trust a person in a leadership role, they begin to buy into the program and the messages

being offered. Once that happens, they begin to take ownership and show a greater commitment to building better lives for themselves. Programs that are successful in helping this to happen become self-perpetuating, and our society as a whole is healthier.”

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul works on the community stories series for the Caledon Institute.

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For more information on the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention, call (toll-free) 1-877-302-6272, or visit the website at www.crime-prevention.org

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