



Needs Assessment: Training for Professionals Who Work with Young Children

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Introduction

Research from neuroscience now confirms what has been evident to many in the child-serving professions – the first five years of development are crucial in a child's ability to learn, to trust, to love and to develop a strong sense of self. While parents have a pivotal role in their child's development, study after study shows children are affected by all of us who touch their lives: daycare providers, social workers, psychologists, speech and language therapists, child welfare workers and family support workers. The more professionals know about healthy child development the better caregiving practices and programming will be.

Invest in Kids Foundation, a national organization dedicated to healthy development of children from birth through age five, decided to examine whether the research on brain development, as well as the more generic areas of child development such as attachment and ages and stages of development, are in the standard repertoire of professionals who regularly work with infants and young children. In addition the Foundation wanted to know what child development topics are of interest to professionals for further training.

This training needs assessment grew out of two observations about the current state of training and education in child development:

- Knowledge about child development is expanding exponentially to accommodate the new findings from brain development research.
- The transfer of new research to current practice does not always happen in a timely manner.

Purpose

The Foundation initiated this study to assess professionals' judgment of their knowledge about child development to identify training needs and gaps in the area of healthy child development, and to inform decisions by both the Foundation and the professions about future training directions.

Research Approach

The Centre for Research and Education in Human Services in Kitchener, Ontario conducted the survey for Invest in Kids Foundation. The researchers sent questionnaires to the following types of experienced professionals:

- ✓ Early childhood educators
- ✓ Child welfare workers
- ✓ Public health nurses
- ✓ Family support workers
- ✓ Children’s mental health psychologists and social workers
- ✓ Speech and language therapists
- ✓ Infant development specialists

Participation in the survey was voluntary. Respondents who reported spending less than 25% of their time actually working with children aged 0 to 6 and their families were dropped from the analysis. 370 completed questionnaires were eligible for analysis, averaging 50 returns per profession. The response rates were generally geographically representative of Ontario, with slightly higher returns from the North and slightly lower returns from the Southeast.

The questionnaire focused on key topics about early child development and administrating effective programs for families with young children. This report covers the child development area, which was designed to reflect a comprehensive, yet manageable overview of this subject.

**Table 1
KEY TOPICS ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

Attachment	Facilitating parenting skills
Brain Development	Infant capacities
Child care issues	Multiple births
Child development 0-3	Newborn appearances
Child development 4-6	Parenting capacity
Common parenting issues	Prenatal risk factors
Cultural sensitivity	Transition to school
Early identification and assessment of special needs	

Respondents rated each of the above topics for:

- ✓ Personal knowledge level
- ✓ Personal assessment of the importance to his/her profession
- ✓ Personal interest in further training

Summary of Key Findings

Personal Knowledge Level

The seven professions, when examined as a whole group, rated themselves as having the most knowledge about: early identification and assessment, parenting, child development and attachment. In comparison, the group of professions as a whole rated their knowledge level of brain development as the lowest, followed by topics about birth (e.g. prenatal risk factors, infant capacities, newborn appearances and multiple births), cultural sensitivity and transition to school.

The high knowledge and low knowledge ratings of child development topics on a profession-by-profession basis appear as follows:

**Table 2
PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE LEVEL BY PROFESSION**

PROFESSION	HIGH KNOWLEDGE	LOW KNOWLEDGE
Child Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Child care issues ➤ Common parenting issues ➤ Child development 0-6 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Multiple births ➤ Brain development ➤ Newborn appearances
Children's Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Common parenting issues ➤ Facilitating parenting skills ➤ Child development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Multiple births ➤ Brain development ➤ Infant capacities
Child Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Parenting capacity ➤ Child care issues ➤ Attachment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Brain development ➤ Infant capacities ➤ Newborn appearances
Family Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Common parenting issues ➤ Child care issues ➤ Child development 0 - 6 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Multiple births ➤ Brain development ➤ Cultural sensitivity
Infant Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Child development 0-3 ➤ Early identification ➤ Common parenting issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Parenting capacities ➤ Transition to school ➤ Brain development
Public Health Nurses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Common parenting issues ➤ Child development 0-3 ➤ Prenatal risk factors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Transition to school ➤ Brain development ➤ Cultural sensitivity
Speech and Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Child development 0 - 3 ➤ Child development 4 - 6 ➤ Infant capacities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Multiple births ➤ Prenatal risk factors ➤ Attachment

		➤ Brain development
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Personal Assessment of Importance

The respondents rated the following child development topics as most important to their professions: early identification and assessment, parenting, child development, attachment and brain development. The topics of less importance included transition to school, issues around birth (prenatal factors, new born behaviour and multiple births) and child care issues. This is the same order as for high and low knowledge, except brain development and child care issues are reversed. Brain development is viewed as highly important and child care issues are reported to be of low importance to the group of professions as a whole, although all professions as a group report they have high knowledge about child care issues.

Knowledge Gap

Statistics were derived for each respondent to measure the gap between the reported level of importance assessed for each topic and the reported level of knowledge about the topic. On a profession-by-profession basis, the top two topics with the greatest gaps between high importance and low knowledge levels are as follows:

**TABLE 2:
TWO LARGEST GAPS BETWEEN
HIGH IMPORTANCE AND LOW KNOWLEDGE**

PROFESSION	TWO LARGEST GAPS BETWEEN HIGH IMPORTANCE & LOW KNOWLEDGE
Child Care	Brain development Early ID/assessment
Children's Mental Health	Brain development Parenting capacities
Child Welfare	Brain development Infant capacities
Family Support	Brain development Parenting capacities
Infant Development	Parent capacities Brain development
Public Health Nurses	Brain development Infant capacities
Speech and Language	Brain development

	Cultural sensitivity
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Brain development is the topic with the largest, or second largest, gap between level of importance and level of knowledge in each of the seven professions. In simple terms, professionals in each occupation think brain development is important to their work, but they do not know much about it.

Personal Training Interests

At the end of the questionnaire the respondents were asked to list their personal preferred list of topics about which they needed to know more to do the best possible job of supporting healthy child development in their profession. While the data presented up to this point represents participants' reactions to a pre-selected list of training topics, this final question allowed people to list any topic about which they wanted to learn more. The topics that emerged most frequently are listed below.

**TABLE 3:
TOPICS OF INTEREST FOR TRAINING**

TOPIC	NO. & % OF RESPONDENTS WHO MENTIONED THE TOPIC	
Assessing & dealing w/ parenting skills and capacities	97	26%
Appropriate age and development milestones	54	15%
Risk factors and risk assessment	49	13%
Staff boundaries and issues regarding work environment	42	11%
Assessment and intervention for children w/ special needs	41	11%
Infant development	41	11%
Providing family support & dealing with family dynamics	38	10%
Attachment and bonding	37	10%
Community resources and collaboration	31	8%
Brain development in the early years	28	7%
Cultural issues and sensitivity	22	6%

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This more qualitative approach to determining training needs produced results similar to the more quantitative approach of the pre-determined checklists. Brain development and cultural issues are mentioned by only a small proportion of the respondents as topics of interest for training, while topics such as parenting skills and capacities are the most popular.

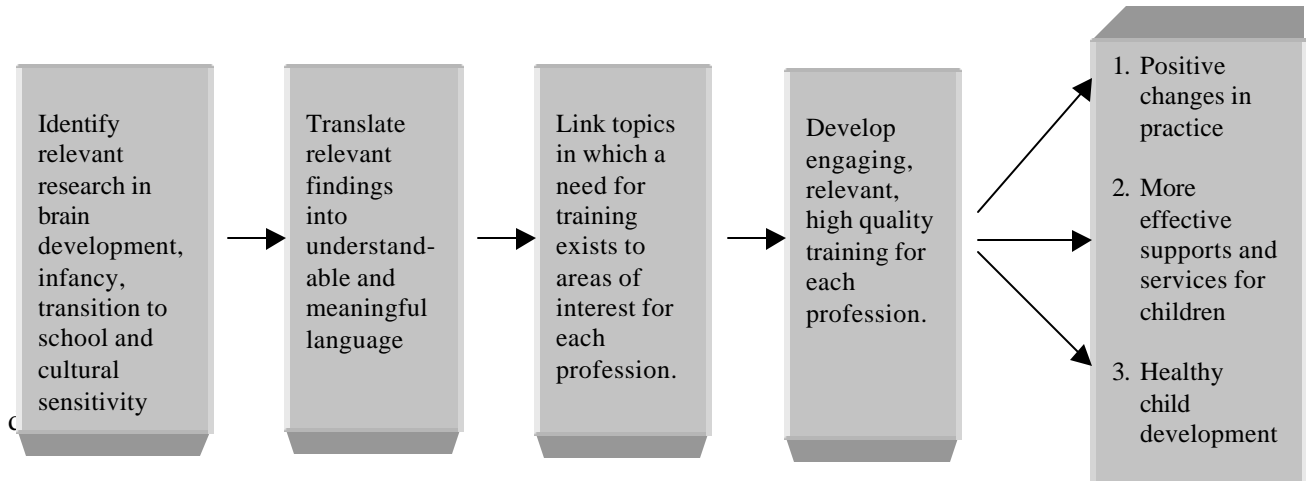
Training Paradox

Professionals are most interested in receiving training on parenting capacities and skills, areas in which they already report high knowledge, and least interested in receiving training on brain development and cultural issues, areas in which they have least knowledge, but which they also identify as important.

Implications

Professionals are unlikely to welcome training in areas of little interest to them, even if they know the topics are important. The challenge is to create a course of professional improvement in key areas of child development that is both engaging and relevant. In other words, we need to attract professionals to new child development topics in ways that capture their interest. The figure below provides a suggested path to achieving these two goals:

FIGURE 1



Conclusions

In laying the groundwork for training in child development, it is not enough to identify what professionals know and don't know, or what they think is important or not important. We need to know what professionals want to know. We cannot assume that if they think they already know an area well that they do not want more training in it. Nor can we assume they will want training in an area they identify as important.

This research uncovered a "training paradox." Professionals appear to want training in child development areas they already think they know about, and not to want training on topics they say are important, but about which they know little. Since the topics viewed as important (brain development, cultural sensitivity and transition to school) are easy to relate to the topics the professionals say they want training (such as parenting capacities and skills), the most promising training approach is to marry the topics-of-interest to the topics-of-importance. This is a path to narrow the gap between knowledge and practice.