

Early life experiences

By Stacy O'Brien - Red Deer Advocate
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A Red Deer project looking at the effect early experiences have on a child's ability to learn will start testing kindergarten students in the fall.

The Understanding the Early Years project got underway in June 2007, with \$358,660 in federal government funding, and will continue for the next two years.

Laurie Lafortune, the community co-ordinator for the project, said children's early years are critical for later outcomes in life.

"So if we can give everyone the best possible start so that they're ready to learn when they get to kindergarten then that is going to have a huge impact on our educational system and on the well-being of these kids themselves," Lafortune said.

The project started by creating a parent directory of all of the services available for children in Red Deer and mapping where those services are located.

This year, data will be collected for all of the kindergarten children within the city limits — which includes more than 1,000 students in the Red Deer Public School District and Red Deer Catholic Regional School Division.

Lafortune said they'll use the Early Development Instrument, developed by the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont.

As part of the process, kindergarten teachers will fill out a form on each of their students in February or March 2009 that will look at: physical health and well-being, social knowledge and competence, emotional health/maturity, language and cognitive development, communication skills and general knowledge.

A smaller sample group of up to 500 parents will do in-depth hour-long interviews over the phone or online, and their children will be assessed through a vocabulary test, a number knowledge test and a test called Who Am I, where the students draw a picture of themselves.

The project is one of about 40 around the country that are collecting information or are complete.

Lafortune said after the information is collected it will be analyzed next year and local organizations will gather to create a community action plan to address the needs of children under six.

Lafortune said there are rapid changes in Red Deer with the growth of the city and she hopes to find out if there are enough services available.

She said the cultural diversity has also increased in the city and hopes the research shows if they've helped those students prepare for school.

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