

Too many children not ready for school: study

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Published: December 17, 2009 6:44 AM

Preliminary findings from a local study suggest 17.8 per cent of children in Red Deer start kindergarten without being developmentally ready in at least one area.

Although lower than the national average, the study's project co-ordinator says the number is still too high.

The study looked at kindergarten children's social competence, emotional maturity, communication and general knowledge, language and cognitive ability and physical health and well-being before receiving formal schooling.

Laurie Lafortune, Understanding the Early Years Red Deer project co-ordinator, said it's good that Red Deer's children scored significantly better than the Canadian average of 27.2 per cent, but 17.8 per cent of students not being developmentally ready in at least one area is still too many.

"We would want every child to have the opportunity to learn and thrive and reach their full potential," Lafortune said. "If we can reduce that 17.8 per cent, there will be more and more children who are able to participate and take advantage of all those opportunities that school provides."

The information was compiled by the Red Deer Understanding the Early Years project, led by Family Services of Central Alberta, with support from Red Deer Catholic and Red Deer Public schools.

Boys scored significantly lower than girls on all developmental areas examined, according to the preliminary report.

One area where children in the Red Deer sample scored particularly well was in physical readiness for school. Attending part-time preschool had a positive impact on students in all five areas of development readiness for school.

The research project showed there is a significantly higher number of lone-parent families in Red Deer for children from birth to age six at 19.9 per cent, compared with 16.2 per cent of families provincially and 17.9 per cent nationally. The study also showed that 13 per cent of the mothers interviewed were experiencing depression.

"So that's a concern because previous studies have certainly found that as far as children thriving and doing well and developing as we would like, that the parents' mental health has a really big impact on that," Lafortune said.

The project looked at families' socio-economic situation, children and their family's involvement in the community and created an inventory of community resources and programs for young children from birth to age six available in Red Deer.

As part of the project, nearly 500 parents of kindergarten students did an in-depth hour-long interview and just over 500 children were given direct assessment that looked at their knowledge of numbers, vocabulary and general knowledge. More than 850 non-special needs Red Deer kindergarten students were observed using the Early Development Instrument, which is a teacher-completed checklist of 104 questions that measures children's readiness to learn at school. As well, Statistics Canada data on socioeconomic information was examined for the Red Deer area.

Lafortune said the information they've gained through the study will help guide decision making of local government officials, service providers and the schools. She said when interviewed, parents spoke about barriers to participation in programs, which will allow service providers to change how they deliver programs. There are also plans to create a community action plan by the spring, coming up with ways to improve opportunities for young children in Red Deer.

The three-year community project received around \$358,000 in May 2007 from the federal government's Understanding the Early Years Initiative and was one of 17 across Canada. More information on the study is available at the Family Services of Central Alberta's website at www.fsca.ca - under Research.

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