

# Community and University Together: Research Partners for 20 Years

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## Onward Willow Partnership

Onward Willow – Better Beginnings, Better Futures is a non-profit organization that provides support to enrich the quality of life for the Willow Road area in Guelph, Ontario. In 1990, the Ontario Government launch the *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* project to discover effective ways of supporting the **healthy development of young children and strengthening family and community life** in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Onward Willow is one of the 8 projects throughout Ontario.

The Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph became involved to study the outcomes that this program could have in the community.

There are **3 goals** of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures initiative:

- **Prevent** and reduce serious emotional and behavioral problems in children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods.
- **Promote** optimal development in children.
- **Strengthen** disadvantaged communities to respond effectively to the needs of children and their families.

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Science in Practice



500 children from families in the Willow Road community between the ages of 0-4 years were included in the project.

There are 3 requirements that were identified to providing high quality programs for these families:

### High Quality Programs

- Provide fewer well-resourced programs, rather than many poorly resourced programs.

### Integrated Services

- Among social, health and education services.

### Parent and Community Leader Involvement

- In all aspects of organization, management and delivery.

Infant child programs included home visits, child care enhancements, playgroups parent and child drop-in, and parent “take-a-break” services.

Parent and in Family Programs included parent support groups, parenting workshops, one-on-one support, emergency supplies, adult education, ESL programs, family camps, and family outreach groups.

## Accomplishments

### Validation

- Researchers and community members co-constructed the interview protocols that were used in the research studies. Community members provided input and also designed measures. One in particular was the *Neighbourhood Sense of Belonging Scale*. From this experience, community members felt that the researchers were genuinely interested in what the community had to say and their expertise was valued.

### Confidence

- Through being actively involved in the research and having their ideas and suggestions incorporated into the evaluation, the community members gained confidence in themselves and realized that they could have an impact on the research being done.

### Research that Impacted the Community

- As a result of this collaboration, the research that was completed was meaningful to the community and provided information that they could use to develop/change their programs. They were able to act on the information provided.

### Trust

- The community became more trustful of and open to university research over the years. At the beginning, the community was very clear that they did not want researchers to come into their community to gather information and then leave. **They wanted to be active participants in shaping what was done.** The researchers became part of the community: sitting on a number of community teams, attending community events, and eating together at celebrations. As a result, trust was built.

### Experiential Learning

- Graduate and undergraduate students were able to gain rich experiences in how to do community engaged research.
- Throughout this collaboration, 2 PhD students, 15 Master students, and 9 undergraduate honour students were able to complete theses and dissertations in collaboration with the Onward Willow community.



## What we Learned about Community Engaged Research

### Challenges and Community Barriers to Overcome

Residents in this community were not previously involved in services and research for several reasons that included:

- Did not know what programs existed
- Did not know / speak English or French
- Could not afford the programs
- Too busy working
- Did not have child care
- No transportation
- Did not share dominant culture
- Felt put down by service providers
- Anger and intense frustration with agency/school personnel and policies



### Learning Outcomes from Collaborating with the Community

From working with the Onward Willow community, we learned several things that have changed the way we engage in community research.

### Flexibility

- Time needed to be taken to engage with the community, where we could meet with them as individuals to discuss their ideas and directions for the project.

### Mutual Respect and Collaboration

- Community members were treated as experts and were involved in all levels of the project including development of research objectives, formulating interview questions, questionnaires, reviewing drafts of the reports, and setting up the community to support the research.

### Acknowledge Ways Community Members Can Participate

- Research was conducted within the community and during convenient times.
- We used plain language to communicate ideas and translated when needed.
- Child care was provided / compensated for and community contributions were recognized through honorariums.

### Research is not done in Isolation from the Community

- Research and Agency partners sat on Community Committees (e.g., Management Board, Research Team and Child and Family team). This engagement enabled researchers to gain a broader perspective on issues and priorities within the community.

- In addition, it enabled the community to gain another perspective on these same issues. Such involvement also enabled researchers to have a broader discussion about the ongoing research questions and strategies and was also a vehicle to disseminate the research to a broader audience.

### Consistency in Relationship with the Community

- Key university faculty were there for the duration of the project. This consistency over time helped to build trust between the community and the researchers.
- The community came to feel that the researchers were committed to them and to telling their story with a fuller understanding of their community. The researchers also felt that they, themselves, gained a fuller understanding of the community.

### Sharing Expertise was Bidirectional

- Community presenters spoke at the university sharing their expertise in course presentations and seminars.
- University researchers shared expertise on community committees.

