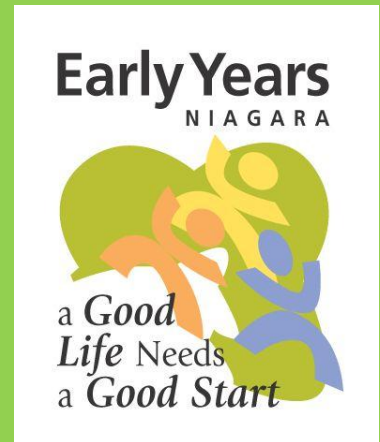


# Early Years Niagara Brief

February 2012



## Families are Strong, Stable and Connected

One of the most valuable gifts that parents/caregivers can give children is quality time spent with them, playing, learning and showing their child that they are loved, cared for and that they belong in their family. Through this quality time spent together, parents are able to demonstrate, encourage and support their children's thinking, behavior, social skills and physical and emotional development that will grow throughout their lives.

Neighbourhoods/communities also play a critical role in the healthy development of children. "The oft-referenced African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' recognizes that children live in families and families live in communities".<sup>1</sup> Children who have strong role models and positive interactions with parents/caregivers and other neighbourhood/community members have a greater opportunity to feel free to explore their world, develop a variety of skills, and build resiliency and self-esteem. Together parents and these other positive role models in their neighbourhoods/communities provide children with the solid foundation that lead to success in school and throughout their lives.

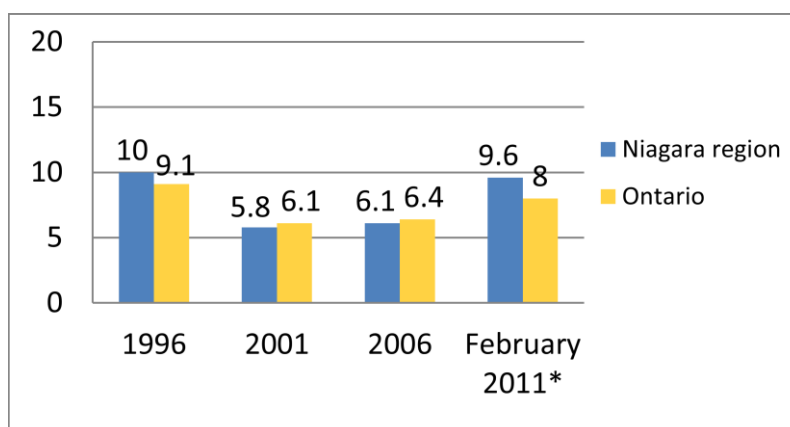
## Indicators

In April 2011, parents and community agencies were asked what they felt were the biggest concerns faced by Niagara families. Over 1100 parents and community agency representatives participated and told us that:

- Family Economic Wellbeing (the unemployment rate & the number of families with children 0-12 years in receipt of Ontario Works)
- Supports for Changing Family Structure (single parents, blended families, grandparents as parents)
- Parental Involvement in School (attending events/activities, volunteering in the classroom)
- Parenting (skills, knowledge, resources/supports)

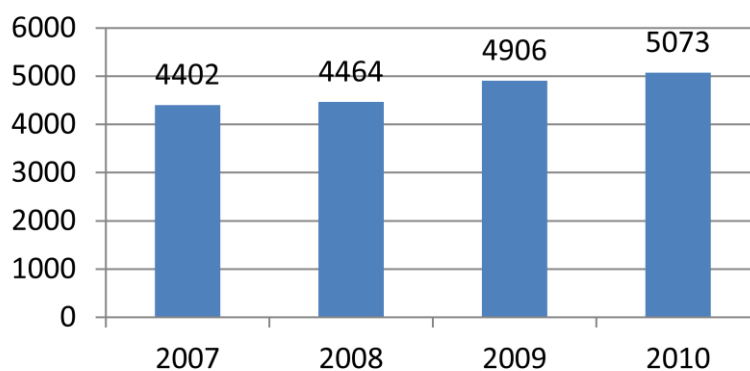
**Trends that were most concerning included:**

**The unemployment rate in Niagara region**



\*Note: Population 15 and over. Unadjusted, by census metropolitan area which does not include Grimsby or West Lincoln

**The number of children aged 0-12 years whose families are in receipt of Ontario Works in Niagara**



## **When asked to tell us more about Family Economic Wellbeing, this is what parents and community agency representatives told us...**

### **“Economics. There is a lack of jobs, industries are closing down”**

In February 2009 Niagara region had the second highest unemployment rate in an urban centre in Canada.<sup>2</sup> The Conference Board of Canada forecasts a 1.4% rise in real Gross Domestic Product (GDP is considered a top measure for economic performance) for Niagara region for 2012, the second-worst in Canada among all census metropolitan areas surveyed.<sup>3</sup> Niagara region's annual real GDP growth has surpassed 2% only once in the last 11 years.<sup>3</sup>

### **“There is an intergenerational effect from living in poverty, a feeling of hopelessness”**

Children who grow up in poverty are at higher risk of living in poverty when they're adults, less likely to graduate from high school and less likely to go on to post-secondary education. They are more likely to rely on social assistance as adults and more likely to have children before they are able to support them.<sup>4</sup>

### **“Types of jobs”**

Since 2005 approximately 7000 manufacturing jobs have been eliminated in Niagara. While there has been growth in jobs in the services sector, this is a shift from higher to lower paying jobs. The average of median incomes for jobs in the services sector was \$32,607. In comparison, manufacturing sector jobs had an average of median incomes of \$47,380.<sup>5</sup>

### **“Families receiving Ontario Works, struggling to make ends meet”**

It has been well documented that families relying on social assistance do not have enough to cover the necessities of life. In 2000 social assistance provided for approximately 55.6% of basic necessities, compared to 50.9% in 2005.<sup>6</sup>

### **“People lack the education/skills for better jobs”**

Niagara has a high percentage of residents with only a high school diploma or less (54%).<sup>5</sup> Even more troubling is that two out of every five younger residents (ages 25-34) in Niagara hold a high school diploma as their highest level of education.<sup>5</sup>

### **“Families need jobs that provide benefits”**

Families require not only a steady income that adequately provides for the basic necessities, but jobs that also include benefits (dental, prescription drug, vision coverage, etc.) for families. Jobs with benefits are coveted.

### **“Families choosing to stay on Ontario Works, because wages don't pay enough to earn a living wage”**

About one third of Niagara region OW participants find seasonal and/or part-time employment, but this type of employment has not typically provided enough income to become independent from social assistance.<sup>7</sup>

### **“Newcomers”**

Children in families who moved from overseas to Ontario since 2004 represent one in every two immigrant children living in poverty.<sup>4</sup> Though recent immigrants are better educated than the average Ontarian, they face higher levels of unemployment and underemployment.<sup>4</sup> In Niagara it is estimated that 12% of those receiving social assistance are newcomers.<sup>7</sup>

**“Housing costs are high”**

When family budgets are stretched by housing costs, parents are forced to make difficult decisions about buying food and other necessities. Families living in poverty are often forced to move in search of cheaper housing. Fifty-one percent of Niagara families spend 30% or more of their disposable income on rent or home payments.<sup>6</sup>

**“Women are less likely to leave an abusive relationship due to their inability to afford housing”**

In 2006 Niagara Regional Police responded to 3695 domestic violence calls involving intimate partners, of these 719 resulted in criminal charges being laid.<sup>7</sup> Niagara Regional Police estimates that children were witness in 50% of domestic violence calls.<sup>7</sup> A 2004 report on abused women and their experiences of the Ontario social assistance system, reported these women often feel re-victimized when negotiating the system.<sup>8</sup>

**“Families who are living under the threat of homelessness”**

Children who are homeless are greatly affected, often experiencing problems at school, poor health and nutrition, they are often sad, depressed and disobedient. In Niagara there are 5381 households waiting for affordable housing, of these 578 households (10.7%) are currently homeless.<sup>9</sup>

**“Transportation around Niagara”\***

Often cited barrier to employment is the lack of a regional transit system. Over 90% of Niagara residents commute to work in their own vehicles, for individuals that lack personal transportation, access to employment is much more difficult.<sup>10</sup>

**\*It should be noted that when this information was gathered from parents and community agency representatives that the Niagara Region Transit System had not been launched.**

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