Exploring the Future of Parenting Education

COMMUNITY REPORT, MARCH 2017
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KW COUNSELLING SERVICES
480 Charles St. East, Kitchener ON N2G 4K5
Phone: 519.884.0000 | Fax: 519.884.7000
Email: info@kwcounselling.com
Web: www.kwcounselling.com

AUTHORS
Diane McGregor, PhD
Director of Family and Community Solutions, KW Counselling Services
Leslie Josling, MSc, G.Dipl., RSW
Executive Director, KW Counselling Services
Rebecca Ferguson, BSW
Project Facilitator, KW Counselling Services

Connect with us at parentingnow@kwcounselling.com

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the findings from our design project, *Exploring the Future of Parenting Education*. Early in 2015, with the support of the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, we set out to transform the way that we do parenting education. We knew that to do this in a truly meaningful way, we needed to be creative and to think outside the traditional “program evaluation” box. To this end, we partnered with Overlap, a local design company, who guided us through the procedures and methods of design thinking. This report describes the methods we employed to engage with parents and caring adults in Waterloo Region, asking them to share with us how they learn their parenting skills and knowledge. It also summarizes what we learned, the design ideas—prototypes—that emerged from our learning and our next steps. Design is a continual process of learning and iterating and we invite you, the reader, to share your learning with us, as you read through this report. In this way, we might continue to shape the future of parenting education.

Over an eight-month period, we connected with more than 650 parents and caring adults and asked them to talk about how they learn about parenting and caring for the children in their lives. We used a range of engagement activities and asked our question in a variety of ways. We analyzed the thousands of thoughts, ideas and stories that were shared with us, extracting common themes and experiences. What seemed like a simple question led us into the complex and intense world of parenting and guided us in understanding not only how parents learn but why they strive to be the best parent they can. We heard that learning is present in almost all aspects of parenting. From the unexpected moments of insight to the intentional act of reaching out for support or guidance, parenting skills and knowledge are continually changing and growing. We saw that in order to fully understand how that learning happens, it was important to understand the nature of the parenting experience itself—how both the small and the big moments shape who we are as a parent and motivate us to learn and grow. Three major themes emerged from our analysis of the “parenting experience”, each with subthemes, detailed in this report. Our conceptualization of the parenting experience then formed the foundation for the key learnings we brought forward to the design stage of the project.

Three main themes describing the parenting experience were identified:

**Being the Parent I Am:** we heard about the array of moment-to-moment experiences that define our sense of “the parent I am”. We heard about experiences of delight and happiness, connection, pride, and feelings of confidence and competence. We also heard about experiences of distress and frustration, embarrassment, disappointment and feelings of incompetence, shame and regret. We saw the delicate balance that exists between the delight and distress of parenting and heard how the scales can tip from one to the other in an instant.
**Becoming the Parent I Am:** we heard about the multiple influences and experiences that have shaped us into the parents we are. People described being influenced by those around them—family, friends, neighbours, spouses, co-workers, medical practitioners, support workers, counsellors—by their own personal characteristics and upbringing, as well as by their children. We frequently received the answer “my child” to the question, “who do you learn from?”

**Learning and Growing as a Parent:** this theme informed our understanding of the learning itself. We heard why learning matters and the kind of experiences parents are seeking from their sources of learning. Two central themes emerged here, one was that parents learn first and foremost through connection with others, the second was that they learn through exploration and observation. We also heard that the learning process is often informal, occurring in any location and at any moment, it is incidental, occurring unexpectedly or by accident, and that these informal, incidental moments are often so inspiring they lead to significant insights and behavioural changes.

Our key learnings then formed the foundation for our next stages of the project in which we designed and tested a number of “prototypes”. Design thinking methodology is a continual process of “ideating”, seeking feedback, prototyping, and testing and then doing it all over again. We returned to our key stakeholders for their ideas and solutions; we sought and incorporated feedback as we tested then moved into our next iteration of the concept. At each stage, we remained grounded in our learning and when in doubt, we went back to our data, just to remind ourselves what parents and others told us of their learning experiences.

Over 30 different ideas eventually evolved into three prototypes that will be brought forward for implementation in 2017.

At the beginning of this project, we set out to transform the way that we offer parenting education to the citizens of Waterloo Region. *Exploring the Future of Parenting Education* was our first step—a rather giant

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**KEY LEARNINGS**

Parenting is a delicate balance of delight and distress. That balance can and does shift in an instant and both weigh equally in the parenting experience.

Parenting is intensely “self-reflective”: parents assess the quality of their experiences through the eyes of their children, the people around them and their own actions and feelings.

Parenting is an ever developing capacity, influenced by how we were raised; by our personal qualities and abilities; by watching and learning from others, including our children; and through support from the people in our lives.

Parents turn to sources such as books, courses and websites for information but to each other for learning.

Learning and growing as a parent is primarily an informal experience; it is often incidental and occurs without intention when we watch others, hear or read something and suddenly gain insight into our own parenting; when we become aware of these moments of insight or learning, they are inspiring and stick with us.

Parents learn best through connection with other parents, exploration and observation, practical and useful ideas, and when diversity is valued.
first step—into the learning experiences of parents and caring adults. We are now on the threshold of our second step as we get ready to launch a new approach to parenting education, Parenting Now: Today. Tomorrow. Together. This model is the culmination of our design process, bringing together three prototypes into a comprehensive approach to parenting education. We believe it captures what we heard from the parents and many others that we spoke with: that parenting is about connecting with the moments of today, building for tomorrow and finding our way together—with our children, family, friends and each other. Our vision is for a system of parenting education that provides a seamless experience for parents as they are seeking information, learning, supports, and relationships.

The three prototypes we are bringing forward from our design process are not intended as standalone ideas; rather, they are interrelated activities for enhancing the skills and knowledge of the parents of Waterloo Region. The prototypes, discussed in detail in the report, and depicted in the graphic below, form the foundation and key activities of our model. As we move into implementation of our new approach to parenting education, we are confident that our next steps are firmly grounded in the stories and learning experiences shared with us throughout this project. At the same time, we know there is more learning to come.

Please connect with us to share your feedback, insights or stories. We can be reached at:

 parentingnow@kwcounselling.com
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Question

At the beginning of 2015, we embarked on a bold new project to transform the way that we do parenting education. We know that effective and meaningful parenting education is both a value and a priority in Waterloo Region (A Community Fit for Children, 2016) and at KW Counselling Services, we have been providing responsive parenting education to the citizens of this region for over 50 years. Our program of parenting groups and workshops has been highly successful, with close to 1000 parents taking part in our program each year. With such a successful program, why would we even consider a ‘bold new approach’? It is because we have been noticing changes—waning attendance at our multi-week groups, increased traffic to parenting websites, Facebook and Twitter conversations reflecting parenting concerns, people seeking quick solutions to parenting problems, parents asking “is there an app for that?”. In today’s world of busy schedules, instant service, online connectivity and readily available digital resources, we had to ask ourselves if our in-person, “classroom style” workshops are what people really want and need. Is this how people actually learn their parenting skills and knowledge? What about the youth of today—our kids who are so digitally sophisticated—how will they want to gain their parenting skills and knowledge when they become parents, ten or twenty years into the future? What, indeed, is the future of parenting education? We did not know.

Background

KW Counselling Services has been offering community-based positive parenting education programs throughout the Waterloo Region for over five decades. Our “Parenting with Passion” brand is widely known and respected as a comprehensive, universal parenting program. Through our calendar of in-person parenting classes as well as projects such as the CTV Parenting with Passion television/DVD series and the Strengthening Our Community public media campaign, we strive to produce parenting education that is accessible, engaging and innovative. Our course evaluations consistently indicate that between 85 and 95% of participants are “very satisfied” with the program and our pre/post outcome measures indicate statistically significant and positive changes in parents’ perceptions of their parenting skills.

I have three teen/young adult kids and they are very connected to their worlds through their phones. People, information and resources are available in a heartbeat. I know that a formal parenting course will not be what grabs their interest when it’s their time to learn. They will turn to those most directly connected in their lives—via their phones and immediate relationships. If we are going to be relevant to them in the future, we need to learn from them now.”

— Leslie Josling
Executive Director, KW Counselling Services
While these results are very positive, we have been told by parents and others that they would like our materials and activities to be more readily accessible and that they would like more interactive and practical dialogue about parenting. Specifically, we have heard that:

- **Parents want useful and effective strategies.**
- **Parents want “real” examples of how positive parenting is done.**
- **Parents want to hear from and connect with other parents.**

There is certainly an interest in our community for accessible, practical and engaging parenting education. There is also a commitment to a wide-scale community approach to parenting education. In Waterloo Region, a comprehensive plan for a region-wide approach to positive parenting has been established as a community priority (Region of Waterloo Public Health, 2012). The Positive Parenting Community Committee (PPCC) grew from this community consultation process. The PPCC is comprised of 15 organizations responding to the need for positive parenting services in the Waterloo Region and we have been active participants since its inception. An emerging priority of the PPCC is to develop mechanisms to communicate positive parenting messages to the parents and the other adults who surround and support the children of Waterloo Region. Connecting with parents—and providing relevant parenting education—is a value we all share.

**The Project**

In order to truly transform our current parenting education practices, we knew that we would need to seek input from those most directly concerned with raising kids: parents and the other adults who surround and support the children in their lives; youth and those who are not yet parents but want to be, someday; community partners—service providers, planning councils, neighbourhood associations, etc—those who are engaged with the parents, caring adults and youth in our region. We also knew that we had to think outside the box, ask a different set of questions, adopt an attitude of curiosity and openness, and explore this issue through the experience of parenting. This was not about program development, outcome measures or a feasibility plan. We knew that to keep asking the same questions and using the same methods, we would keep getting the same solutions. We wanted a different solution—but it was a solution we could not even begin to imagine. As we started on this journey, we had no idea where we were headed.
We saw design thinking as much more than a methodology: we saw it as a genuine and respectful way to meaningfully engage the people who matter to us, the parents and caring adults of Waterloo Region. As an agency, it is an approach that is consistent with our mission, vision and values, as we strive for “a community where no one is left behind; a community where positive relationships are valued as our highest achievement”. We entered this work with a desire to learn, to engage with the people most concerned with parenting. We felt that design thinking would not only help us learn, but would also help us forge those relationships that would lead us to discovery and change.

Our Partners

A project of this magnitude cannot be the work of a single organization. For our first step, we partnered with a local design company, Overlap Associates Inc. (www.overlapassociates.com). Overlap is an innovative Kitchener design company that collaborates with organizations to engage creative and consumer-centred solutions to complex problems. With design thinking at the heart of their work, Overlap guides organizations in an approach to collecting and analyzing data that incorporates the perspectives and experiences of multiple contributors and culminates in unforeseeable yet tangible results. We contracted with Overlap to provide their expertise in design work. Working alongside us, their team of Strategists contributed to the design of sessions and workshops, created support materials and work sheets, trained our team members to facilitate and synthesize engagement modules, and provided ongoing guidance and support.
consulting support throughout the project. They were our coaches and cheerleaders and with them we found our way to the unforeseeable yet tangible results we hoped for.

We applied for funding for this project through the Children’s Initiatives Grant of the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation (www.lshallmanfdn.org). The Hallman Foundation has supported our parenting education in the past, most recently through Strengthening Our Community, a broad, population-based media campaign designed to promote positive parenting skills and knowledge throughout Waterloo Region. We know them to be a foundation that takes risks with innovative projects but we also knew that to seek funding on a project that rested solely on a creative idea and a new methodology was a bold request. We could tell them what we wanted to do and how we would do it. We could demonstrate why this was a good idea and we could link the benefits directly to the parents and caring adults of Waterloo Region but we couldn’t tell them what would happen, what our outcomes would be or what ideas or strategies would emerge. We couldn’t tell them what they could expect at the end of the project. At the beginning of a design project, there are only questions—and a gut-felt sense that these questions will take you to where you need to be. From a funder point of view, a tremendous leap of faith is required to support such a project. Fortunately for the citizens of Waterloo Region, the Lyle S Hallman Foundation is served by a courageous leadership team and Board of Trustees and they agreed to step into the world of design thinking with us. We are forever grateful for and in awe of their courage.

We have also valued and benefitted from a number of informal partnerships, particularly with the members of the Positive Parenting Community Committee and The Children’s Planning Table. Members of these organizations and agencies have participated in our various activities, working hard alongside us throughout the project. They have offered their expertise as service providers, challenged our thinking, helped us connect with parent groups, contributed their ideas, and offered their enthusiastic support of the project. Many also donned their parenting hats and talked about their experiences as a parent. We could not have done this work without their support and their input. As we move forward into the implementation phase, their ongoing engagement will continue to be vital to the success of these next steps.

**Exploring the Future of Parenting Education**

In January 2015, we implemented our design project, *Exploring the Future of Parenting Education*. Funded by the Lyle S Hallman Foundation and guided by Overlap, we set out to learn about how parents and other adults learn the knowledge and skills they need to best support and nurture the children in their lives. Following the design thinking process, we began by engaging with our key stakeholders—the parents, future parents and caring adults of Waterloo Region. We asked, “As a parent, a caring adult or someone who is not yet a parent, how do you want to learn about supporting and nurturing the children in your life?” This question took on many shapes and iterations as our conversations progressed, but remained at the core of what we were seeking: to understand peoples’ experiences as they learned their parenting skills and knowledge. This was the beginning of an amazing journey, the details of which are captured in this report. As our partners at Overlap taught us, “design thinkers *empathize* with their user to understand their needs,
define the dimensions of the problem, ideate to generate solutions, prototype the solutions to collect feedback from their use, and use what they learn to continually improve.” We became design thinkers.

What did we do?

We talked with parents, caring adults, youth, service providers—the people in our region who are invested in raising our kids. Over the course of the engagement phase of the project, we talked with over 600 people, and asked them how they learn their parenting skills and knowledge. Guided by Overlap, we used a variety of engagement methods—stakeholder labs, street interviews, an online survey and random conversations. We also talked with local experts and leaders who are educators engaged in a variety of learning modalities and asked them to imagine the future of parenting education. We compiled our mountains of notes and immersed ourselves in the stories we had been told. We marveled as common themes and issues began to emerge. We developed conceptual models and sought feedback on them. We hosted design labs, inviting more people into the conversation. At the design labs, we shared our learnings from the engagement phase and then asked people to imagine how we might create a new approach to parenting education. Over 30 different ideas—potential prototypes—emerged from these conversations. New teams were then formed as we explored and tested the various ideas. We attended public events and sought feedback. We did trial runs of some of the ideas, and sought feedback. In the end, three distinct prototypes emerged and will be brought forward for implementation in 2017. Over the two year span of this project, and through all of its activities, we engaged more than 1000 people in conversations about parenting education. This report captures the results of our project, including the details of our methods, analyses, design labs and prototyping sessions. Figure 1 depicts our design process.

Figure 1: Design Process

![Design Process Diagram]
The Purpose of this Report

This report is intended as a vehicle to inform the citizens of Waterloo Region about the results of our two-year project, *Exploring the Future of Parenting Education*. We promised this information to those who contributed their time, their perspectives and their stories to this project. We hope, as they read this report, they feel proud of the contribution they have made to parenting education. We also hope this report helps inform and inspire all of us who are raising, supporting and caring about the children in our lives. Raising children is a journey of life-long learning and we hope that this report provides insight into the joys and challenges, the successes and setbacks of that journey. Finally, this report is intended as a resource for all of us who are invested in parenting education: our community partners, our funders, our politicians and our community leaders. We hope the results of this project will help inform our future work together.

Before we delve into the heart of our learnings, we need to understand current practices in parenting education. The next chapter reviews the current literature, both broadly and locally, and explores not only why parenting education matters but the current trends and practices that impact how parents learn their parenting skills and knowledge. This review contextualizes our results within the larger framework of parenting education.
Parenting Matters!

Parenting—and caring for the children in our lives—is perhaps the single most important activity for any of us. Our children, from before they are born and throughout their lives, bring us our greatest joys and our greatest challenges. Whether we are mom or dad, grandparent, auntie, uncle, coach, neighbour or school teacher, we play important roles in the lives of those children who are in our lives. This quote, from Forest E. Witcraft, was first published in a Scouting magazine in early 1950. Dr. Witcraft was writing about making a difference in the lives of young Scouts but his words ring true for any of us who have babies, children, teens and young adults around us. Truly, the world is different when we matter to a child, of any age.

Our world view of parenting varies by age, by culture and by context. What doesn’t change though, is the knowledge that parenting matters. We know from many years of research that positive and effective parenting skills lead to positive developmental outcomes for children (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007). Children flourish when caregivers are engaged in their lives, responsive to their needs and experiences, provide developmentally-appropriate structure, support and guidance, and delight in their ways of being in the world. Parental warmth and responsiveness form the foundation of secure parent-child attachments (Hughes & Baylin, 2012) and the quality of the parent-child relationship has been established as a key protective factor not only in promoting optimal development, but also as a positive mediating influence when children experience stress or adversity (Egeland, 2009; Fraser Mustard Institute for Human Development, 2015).

This research and our universal belief in “good parenting”, however, puts a heavy burden on parents. What does it take to be that parent—the one who raises such a developmentally capable and happy child? While we might all agree that there is no one right way to parent, we are nonetheless bombarded with images and information that depict a parenting “ideal”. The truth, however, is that there are moments in our parenting, when each and everyone one of us does not know what to do, when we do not have the skills or knowledge to navigate a particular situation or when we react in ways we would like to undo. Indeed, “real” parenting is just as much about these difficult moments as it is about the ideal....and all the space in between.

While it may be that not all parents possess the skills and knowledge they need for optimal parenting, almost all would report that they are motivated to become the best parent they can. Throughout this project we have consistently heard that becoming the best parent possible is important to parents. When
asked why, the answer is invariably “because my children deserve it!” This is consistent with our belief that, regardless of situation, parents are motivated to do the best they can for their children. We also believe that change is always possible when relationships are enhanced and these two values form the foundation of our beliefs about parenting education. We are committed to parenting education that is accessible, relevant and engaging for all parents. We know that when parents—and caring adults—learn the skills they need to support and nurture their children, the result is positive change for themselves, their children and their families.

Why Invest in Parenting Education?

Investment in high-quality, universal parenting education is as critical to community health and wellbeing as are investments in mental health strategies, community safety, affordable housing and employment supports. Effective, universal parenting education is a proven method for ensuring optimal developmental outcomes for children and for enhancing overall family wellbeing and we believe that investing in parenting education is, in the words of Bowman and his colleagues (2010), “among the best investments any community can make”.

Formal parenting education has been demonstrated as an effective means for improving parenting practices (Hotchkiss & Biddle 2009; Thomas & Simmer-Gembeck, 2007). These studies report improvement in positive discipline strategies, improved parent-child relationship and increased parental sensitivity to children’s needs. There is also solid evidence that changes in parental behaviours lead to significant changes in child behaviour in the home as well as at school (Sanders & Morawaska, 2009). Barth (2009) investigated the role of maternal depression and stress on parenting skills and found that increasing parenting skills through formal education led to decreased feelings of depression for the mother; this, in turn, led to improvement in child conduct.

The current literature also identifies a number of factors about the educational models that are most effective in creating change in parenting practices. Hotchkiss and Biddle (2009) concluded that universal rather than targeted models demonstrated the best effect. They noted that the universal model reached the largest number of parents and was essential to reducing the stigma and shame experienced by parents identified as at risk or vulnerable. Additionally, programs developed with evidence-based content are the most effective (Bowman, Pratt, Rennekamp & Sektnan, 2010). We have, of course, known for decades that children do best when supported by warm, responsive and consistent parenting but, over the past 10 to 15 years, best practices in parenting education have increasingly identified the critical role of the parent-child relationship in positive developmental outcomes for children and teenagers. Programs such as Triple P
Positive Parenting Program (2014), Circle of Security (Powell, Cooper, Hoffman & Marvin, 2009), CONNECT (Morretti, Braber & Obsuth, 2009) and Positive Discipline in Everyday Parenting (Durrant, 2013) are all evidence-based programs that help parents increase their understanding of the importance of the parent-child relationship and to develop the skills to respond sensitively and consistently to their children’s needs.

Current Practices and Future Trends in the Delivery of Parenting Education

From Dr. Spock to Barbara Coloroso and countless other parenting experts before or after, there is a plethora of information and advice available to parents. A recent search on Amazon.com revealed more than 100,000 books under the topic “parenting”. Since the mid-1990s there has also been an abundance of parenting information available online—literally, at our fingertips—that has grown exponentially each year since. Parenting classes, workshops, support groups, Facebook and other Social Media groups, “mommy blogs”, informal gatherings, webinars, conferences….the list of methods parents can and do engage in their learning seems endless. How useful or trustworthy is all of this, however? We may intuitively trust the “expert” but approaches and belief systems vary so widely that it is difficult to know which approach or which “expert” best fits with our own beliefs and experiences. Indeed, finding effective parenting education is akin to shopping in a big-box grocery store: the sheer volume of choices is staggering. The following review summarizes various delivery methods and considers future trends in parenting education.

Learning in the Classroom

Traditionally, parenting education has been modelled after the educational school system and has offered parents the opportunity to gain knowledge through in-class workshops, seminars and courses. Classroom education has been found to increase access to information and provide for in-person connection for knowledge transfer (Gazmararian et al., 2014). In our experience, the most effective model of classroom learning is one which combines meaningful content with engaged discussion. As parents share their parenting experiences, they build relationships with other parents and develop the social support networks that not only help to sustain their learning but foster increased coping and stress reduction (Ottawa Child and Youth Initiative, 2013). One of the most frequent comments we get on our evaluation is “I was so relieved to know that I am not the only one!” Parents value the time to learn and share that the classroom model provides.

The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs explored promising practices in parenting education (Mann, 2008) and concluded that good content is only one feature of an effective parenting education program. They explored program delivery methods and concluded there are four main features of the classroom style of parenting education that make it effective. These include engagement (does the program address access barriers, is it open and inviting, does it respond to participant needs and motivate them to return?), learning (does the program respond to different learning styles, address diversity, provide content that is interesting and relevant?), practice (are there multiple methods to engage with the material and “try
The “flipped classroom” could definitely work for parenting. I have four daughters and I like to know something right away. A website is great for that—for reading and learning—but I wouldn’t want to think there were no workshops. That is the time I could come and see other parents and hear about their experiences.

Kathryn Brillinger, Teaching and Learning Consultant

Brillinger (K. Brillinger, personal communication, March 18, 2015), a teaching and learning consultant at Conestoga College in Kitchener, Ontario, described similar benefits to the classroom model of learning. She noted that the traditional classroom facilitates both knowledge transfer and the opportunity to interact with other learners. She went on to state, however, that although this model has been the typical path for learning, new studies show that a “flipped classroom” model may also benefit learners immensely. A flipped classroom allows for students to learn through books and online modules in their home environment and then attend a classroom experience for sharing and experimenting with the information learned. Brillinger noted that students respond very positively to this model and that increases in attendance and engagement have been observed. There is compelling evidence that flipped classrooms significantly increase student engagement in their learning, leading to improved learning outcomes overall (Brame, 2013).

Learning through Parent Support Groups and Informal/Drop-in Programs

Parents learn from each other. They get together over coffee, at soccer games or during parent/child activities. Many turn to friends, parents, siblings, neighbours or a host of other people for support and advice. Indeed, it truly does take a community to raise a child—and to support the parents raising that child. When these natural networks of support are available, parent well-being can be positively impacted (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2004).

Parent support groups are also an effective method of parenting support and parenting education. They have been demonstrated to improve sense of well-being for mothers, increase parental sense of confidence in their parenting skills, and reduce the experience of parenting stress (First5LA, 2012). The literature review conducted by First5LA, a family support agency in Los Angeles, also found that parents who attended peer support groups reported increased knowledge of child development and healthy parenting practices. Some parents are less likely to approach an expert for support or education and using a peer model can normalize the parenting process (Parenting and Family Support, 2015).
Within Waterloo Region, there is a peer support model designed to provide neighbourhood supports for parents and children. The Peer Health Worker Program uses peer-based approaches to provide communities and neighbourhoods with the knowledge and skills to increase the overall health of parents or caregivers and their children. It is also intended to prevent and reduce feelings of isolation felt by parents and caregivers. At Kinbridge Community Association in Cambridge, Ontario, for example, the Peer Health Workers host parenting conversations as part of their neighbourhood development strategy (J. McCoomb, personal communication, July 21, 2015). Their Peer Health Workers personally invite community members to attend the sessions; coffee and snacks add to the social atmosphere. Parents are engaged in conversations about parenting issues and connected with other community resources when and as needed. As someone who shares a common experience with community members, the peer workers are able to create connections among neighbourhood parents, facilitating relationships that continue beyond the group meetings; their invitation and encouragement to attend these parenting conversations also helps connect those parents who do not easily reach out for support, reducing isolation and increasing community connectedness. In 2004, The Region of Waterloo conducted an evaluation of their program and found significant impact on neighbourhoods—and the residents of those neighbourhoods—as a result of the peer health worker program (Region of Waterloo Public Health, 2004). Most notably, they have found that as parental strengths are developed, leadership capacity emerges and parents begin to support each other, beyond the intervention of the peer worker.

A key component of the efficacy of informal parenting groups is the capacity for service providers to be present when and where parents are spending their time. One such model is at the Ontario Early Years Centres, where parents gather with their children. They are there to engage their children in play and learning but they are often learning about parenting at the same time. Parents connect with each other, talk about parenting and even watch each other as they are parenting. Often, the learning is unexpected and useful, as the parent in the above quote expresses. Informal conversations are an essential component of parent learning, both for the parent and the staff at the Early Years Centres. At Our Place Family Resource and Early Years Centre in Kitchener, Ontario, the informal conversations with parents also provide direction to their staff for more formal parenting education opportunities (W. Kampijan, personal communication, September 9, 2015). Kampijan stated, “It is important to pay attention to what parents are experiencing and talking about—what the trends are—because if you don’t appeal to what’s happening in their life right now...”

"There is a lot of guesswork in parenting and when I need answers I come to places like the Early Years Centre. I learn from other moms and the people who work there. The other day, I watched a mom handle a conflict between our two kids. She got down on the floor with them, spoke so patiently and the problem was settled peacefully. I learned a lot from watching her and have started doing what she does.

Parent"
it’s not going to be relevant to them. At Our Place, we have the opportunity for the informal conversations...in our peer groups, our early learning programs, as parents and children are moving about the building, in the kitchen while they are getting their coffee. Our staff does a really good job of picking up the trends that we hear so we can work with it and provide the topics that matter to our parents.”

Learning Online

Use of the internet has exploded the possibilities for online learning and this includes parenting education. Indeed, parents go to the internet for parenting information in increasingly vast numbers. What are they doing online? Parents, like any user of the internet, are emailing, reading news articles, and searching for general information (Dworkin, Connell & Dot, 2013). Dworkin and her colleagues at the University of Minnesota surveyed over 2000 parents about their internet use and found that 86% reported that they view the internet as a useful parenting resource. Of those parents, 75% reported that the internet has improved their access to parenting information; most stated that they readily found the information they were seeking and that it was helpful. In a large literature review, Plantin and Daneback (2009) found that the most frequently researched topics by parents centered on general health and developmental concerns for their children. They noted that parents also seek information about general parenthood but added that there is an increasing trend toward parents seeking more than just reports or articles; rather parents seem to be increasingly interested in experience-based information, looking for descriptions and stories about how other parents are reacting to certain issues. They reviewed the comments sections on a number of parenting websites, and found that around 30,000 comments were registered on a daily basis in chat rooms and discussion sections (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). Clearly, the internet is not simply a source of information for parents—it is a place of connection.

It would seem that connection with parents and other supports is a key component of parent engagement on the internet. Nieuwboer, Fukkink and Hermanns (2013) conducted a meta-analytic review exploring the efficacy of online tools for parenting education. They found that, overall, web-based learning modules, adapted from evidence-based programs, led to positive improvements in parenting knowledge and sense of competency. Interestingly, they also found that programs which provided opportunities for parents to connect with each other or a professional support person while participating in the web-based learning also showed positive changes in their parenting attitudes and behaviours. In this study, they also looked at various methods for delivering parenting content and found that many programs used a variety of methods, including animated characters, self-directed tests, videos and interactive exercises. They found that none of these methods were specifically related to parent outcomes, however they concluded that the combination of multi-media methods, evidence-based content and both on- and off-line supports contribute to the overall efficacy of online parenting education.

Online training modules that make use of gamification are also proving to be effective tools for engaging parents in parenting education. Gamification, as defined on Wikipedia, is the application of game-related elements into a non-gaming context, such as learning modules. There is considerable research attesting to
the impact of gamification on learning (see Kapp, 2012); in parenting education, Love and her colleagues (2016) at the Triple P Research Network found that a combination of videos, gamification and social networking had a positive effect on parenting practices and was associated with reduced parenting stress. Their study targeted vulnerable, hard to engage families and found that the gaming component of the curriculum motivated parents to reach out to other parents, compare results and share strategies. In her work at the community college, Brillinger (personal communication, March 18, 2015) commented that the introduction of gamification to online modules has increased student engagement with and completion of materials. She noted that people learn through creative gamification; it motivates learning and individuals will sustain their attention on the screen when rewards or activities prompt their continued involvement.

Online videos such as Parentchannel.tv (https://www.youtube.com/user/ParentChannelTV/) aim to support parents and caregivers in their everyday questions about the physical and emotional wellbeing of children in their care. The use of online videos can be an efficient format for teaching parenting education to a large population of parents and caregivers, a format that was reported to be favoured by parents over multi-week parenting groups (Metzler, Sanders, Rusby, & Crowley 2012).

Blogging is another growing source of online learning for parents. Online blogging communities have become very popular, especially for caregivers in the home raising young children. Women on parental leave often feel isolated from their primary social network at their workplace and are also often geographically separated from their family of origin (A. Morrison, personal communication, May 28, 2015). Blogging provides a vehicle for self expression and emotional reciprocity, as bloggers post their own experiences, receive comments from their followers and provide comments to those they follow (Morrison, 2014). In the world of “mommy blogging”, the blogosphere provides women the space to make connections and build trusted communities with people who experience similar stages or issues in parenting (Morrison, 2014; Pettigrew, Archer & Harrigan, 2016). Being told by an expert how to parent can be daunting, but advice from a peer network is different (A. Morrison, personal communication, May 28, 2015). Pettigrew et al (2016) found that women reported that in addition to the connections they formed, they felt their parenting skills and knowledge where improved through their blogging. Blogging, then, is an online tool that has the potential to lessen the experience of parental isolation, create peer mentoring and connection, and promote enhanced parenting skills.

**Social Media**

The opportunities for connection with other parents via the internet and social media seem to be growing at the same exponential rate as the internet itself. Social media sites such as Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter and LinkedIn are among those currently most popular, but this list seems to grow or change rapidly. At the PEW Research Centre, a “fact tank” exploring the trends shaping our world, they report that 66% of adults use some type of social media. It seems that parents, however, use social media at a higher rate than the general population of adults: surveying more than 1,000 parents of children under the age of eighteen, the PEW Research Centre found that 75% reported using social media (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison,
While a range of sites are used by parents, 74% report using Facebook; mothers use social media at a higher rate overall than fathers. Parents are using social media primarily for the purposes of connecting with others and for sharing information (Dugan, et al, 2015; Connell, 2012), often personal information about self and family. Social media sites also appear to be sources of parenting information, however. The PEW study reported that 59% of parents found useful parenting information while exploring social media sites and the Connell study reported 56% of parents used social networking sites specifically for parenting related concerns. Wikipedia defines social media as “computer-mediated technologies that allow for the creating and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks”. Social media then is about creating community and making connections—it is no wonder that parents are active users!

The Digital Divide

As parents are increasingly using the internet for parenting information and learning, where does that leave those who do not have ready or easy access to the internet? What about those with lower levels of literacy? A recent study conducted by IPSOS Reid (2015) found that 95% of Canadians are currently accessing the internet: 91% subscribe to the internet in their homes, 2% access the internet somewhere outside their homes and 2% access the internet via mobile only. This means that at least 7% of Canadians do not have ready and easy access to the internet. The IPSOS study found that among those who do not subscribe to the internet, almost half (49%) stated that the internet has no relevance for them and the researchers conclude that the “digital divide” is, in part, driven by those who are not motivated by or interested in accessing the internet. However, when looking at demographic profiles of subscribers and non-subscribers, their results indicate that more than half of the nonsubscribers (53%) report high school or lower level of education and 69% report earning less than $50,000 annually. Income and education level clearly impact access.

The digital divide is not just a question of the affordability or personal relevance of the internet—it is also about the complex skills that are required to navigate the digital world. High levels of digital literacy skills are required to use the internet and before an individual can develop their digital literacy skills, they must have better reading, writing, document-use and computer skills. As more and more information can only be accessed online and requires at least moderate levels of literacy to effectively understand the written information contained on websites, people with low income, low literacy and limited access to the internet are at increasing disadvantage in our digital age. Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington (http://www.projectread.ca/) reports that 48% of adults ages 16-65 fall into the lowest levels of literacy. They go on to report that low literate adults are 2.5 times more likely to experience unemployment compared to those with higher levels of literacy. Joanne Davis, Family Literacy Program Manager with Project READ, described the challenges she sees facing the families she works with; she stated, “Many low income families often do not own a computer nor can they pay for internet access at home. So, while their digital literacy skills (especially in younger age groups) may be variable, the lack of access is a huge problem. Secondly, many lower literate folks need to improve their basic literacy skills before they can address their digital literacy skills. There are complex skills involved in navigating the digital world and we are rapidly
leaving these folks behind. This is the digital divide I see.” (J. Davis, personal communication, November 10, 2016).

As parenting education becomes increasingly internet-based, it is necessary that accessibility be a priority as we move into the future of parenting education: not only is accessibility to the internet itself necessary, but the information on the internet must be readable, engaging and relevant to people of all levels of literacy.

**Conclusion**

Parenting education is thriving in the 21st century! There is clearly value in all forms of parenting education, from books to inperson groups to online resources and social media networking. The common thread that has emerged throughout this review is that parents are motivated to connect with other parents, they learn from each other, provide support and encouragement to each other and actively seek to connect with each other. Whether online or inperson, connection is at the heart of our learning.

The remainder of this report turns to the work that we did, exploring the future of parenting education and the learnings that emerged.
Within the context of current approaches to parenting education as well as our own experiences delivering parenting education for more than five decades, we set out to learn. Our intention was to generate conversation—and engage people in a dialogue about how they learn their parenting skills and knowledge.

Engagement is the first step in the design process. We employed an expanding set of methods—beginning with Stakeholder Labs, then Street Team Surveys and then an Online Survey. We also held a Parenting Education Resource Fair with a keynote address from a well-know parenting educator, to further engage participants in talking about parenting. Each method engaged people in a different way and each method helped us learn from a slightly different point of view. The logo that we developed for this process reflected our belief that we would be able to engage people in these conversations: we believed they would have a lot to say and we were right....they did, indeed, have a lot to say!

**Stakeholder Labs**

Stakeholder Labs are a method of engagement consisting of custom-designed, facilitator-led sessions used to collect insights and ideas from a stakeholder group. Through a combination of exercises that provide opportunity for personal reflection, small group conversation and large group sharing, stakeholder labs are intended to elicit the thoughts, experiences and needs of various stakeholders.

We began our Labs by asking participants to talk about their parenting experiences—both those moments when they felt like the parent they wanted to be as well as those moments when they felt like the parent they did not want to be. We then asked participants to talk about the factors that influenced them becoming the parent they are now as well as how they would like to continue learning their parenting skills and knowledge. With each question, participants reflected on their own experiences, writing key words and phrases onto coloured stickies. In small groups, they shared their personal reflections with each other, putting their stickies onto a larger board and clustering their experiences into themes and common experiences.

We had volunteer note-takers recording the conversational bits that did not end up on stickies as well as recording the larger group conversations as small groups shared the themes and commonalities that had arisen in their discussions. In addition, just prior to leaving the session, participants completed a small worksheet about their experiences and preferences in learning their parenting skills and knowledge.
In all, from March until June 2015, we held 12 Stakeholder Labs with 96 participants, in total. Participants were recruited from posters we circulated via our community partners and our own parenting network. We were also invited to attend existing groups of parents by several of our community partners. We did not collect demographic information from participants, nor record any personal details. All participants were informed about the purpose of the Labs and informed about the research nature of the project. An Informed Consent was completed by each participant. In addition, most participants also consented to our use of their photographs and comments (only those who consented are depicted in this report). Although we did not collect information about individual participants, we did make every effort to ensure diversity among our groups. We held several sessions with various newcomer groups, met with a group of teen moms, met with staff at White Owl Native Ancestry, and met with a group of parents who receive income through Ontario Works. In addition, we held two groups that specifically addressed the experiences of caring adults, one with teachers from a local elementary school and one with others who identified as a caring adult. Although we did not hold specific groups, several participants identified as youth who were not yet parents (but are hoping to be one day) and several identified as living in a rural community.

The output from these Labs was comprised of the statements on the stickies, the notes from the note-takers and the participant worksheets. At the end of each session, we also asked participants to reflect on their experience of the Lab itself. Over and over again, we heard that participants enjoyed the opportunity to connect with other parents and to share their thoughts and ideas. They expressed feeling that the conversations reinforced that parenting is important. In particular, participants expressed feeling that it felt good to talk about those moments in parenting when we are not the parent we want to be. One parent in particular stated, “It’s good to know that everyone struggles.”

**Street Team Surveys**

The second stage of our engagement strategy was the use of Street Team Surveys. Street Teams are intended to connect with a broad range of citizens through “in the moment”, short, qualitative interviews. They are considered to be an effective tool within the context of large community initiatives because they actively reach out to people where they gather (e.g., at Festivals, parks, sporting activities).
Through the Stakeholder Labs, we learned a great deal about the parenting experience—about the delights of parenting as well as the struggles. We also learned about the various influences people described as impacting their parenting. For our Street Team conversations, we wanted to dig a bit deeper into the learning experience and find out from people what they wanted to learn, how they wanted to learn it and who they wanted to learn it from. We also wanted to know what mattered to them in their learning journey as a parent. We designed a brief survey and participants were given the choice of completing the survey in conversation with one of our volunteers or completing in on their own. We offered a five dollar gift card to Tim Horton’s as incentive for participation. Prior to completing the survey, participants were informed about the purpose of the interview and how to access information about the results of the project. We did not collect any information about participants other than whether or not they identified as a parent, caring adult or future parent.

In the process of doing this work, we learned that it is necessary to have a permit to attend public events to talk with the general public. This forced us to change our strategy somewhat as we had not budgeted either the time or finances for obtaining permits. We decided to target public events that we knew were of interest to a broad range of citizens and which were happening in June and July, 2015. As a result, we attended the KW Multicultural Festival, St Jacob’s Farmers Market and the Kitchener Farmer’s Market. At these locations, we obtained 305 completed surveys. Based on our conversations, we know that we spoke with people from many different cultural and economic backgrounds. We spoke with people from rural districts as well as those from outside Waterloo Region. While the five dollar gift card was an incentive for many, people openly engaged in conversations with our volunteer interviewers and expressed feeling delighted to have the opportunity to talk about how they have learned their parenting skills and knowledge. As the father in the quote below expressed, talking about learning about parenting is not something we regularly do.

“What a great question! No one has ever asked me this before and, truthfully, I have never stopped to think about how I learn my parenting skills.”

Parent completing a Street Team Survey
Online Survey

In October 2015 we launched an online survey, this time digging more into the kinds of parenting education resources people prefer, how they access these resources and how satisfied they feel with them. We also asked people to tell us about their online activities when seeking parenting education. Surveys are a quick way to gather information and an essential tool when we need to talk with a large group of stakeholders. In order to increase our reach to as many individuals as possible, we also presented the survey in four languages other than English: Mandarin, Spanish, French and Urdu.

We also used the survey to gain some insight into some basic demographics of participants. We asked people to tell us their age, their role in the lives of children (parent, caring adult, etc) and where they lived (urban vs. rural locations). We distributed the survey widely and obtained 211 responses. We were disappointed by this number as we had hoped for a greater response. However, we became aware that several online surveys had been circulating to parents from other organizations during this time and we attributed the low turn out to “survey fatigue”. Nevertheless, our 211 responses yielded interesting information and helped to effectively guide our next steps quite effectively.

Parenting Education Resource Fair

Our final engagement strategy was to host a resource fair, with the member organizations of the Positive Parenting Community Committee. The Resource Fair was intended as a vehicle to bring parents together to talk about parenting education and learn about the range of services and resources provided to parents in our Region. The evening of “connection and learning” also featured a key note address by parenting educator Alyson Schafer. Her presentation, *Honey I Wrecked the Kids*, was a positive draw for families as Alyson Schafer is a well-known figure in Waterloo Region. As participants explored the various booths and enjoyed a range of refreshments, we circulated and invited conversations about the future of parenting education. As always, we found that people were very willing to share their experiences about how they developed their parenting skills and knowledge. At the event, there were 85 attendees and 15 different organizations providing parenting education resources to the parents of Waterloo Region.

Summary

Overall, we connected with 697 people during the engagement phase of this project. There were also countless and random conversations that we had with parents and others interested in raising children as we progressed through the project. These were conversations with other service providers, parents or others that we have personal relationships with, or people we were chatting with at a social event or a business meeting. As we discovered, people enjoy talking about how they have learned their parenting
skills, even while in a business meeting! Often experiences were expressed as highly memorable and important moments in time. As the quote depicts, these moments stay with us.

During the engagement phase, we also spoke with a number of local individuals who have expertise in various aspects of adult education. We spoke with individuals who we saw as innovators in the area of adult or online education and asked them to talk about the current issues that they see impacting learning, innovations that they have implemented and how their innovations might apply to the future of parenting education in particular. We are very grateful for their time and expertise, much of which has found its way into this report as well as into our project overall. Their input really did make a difference.

“When my son was little, I didn’t always know what to do. I remember watching another mom one day and was struck by how calm and relaxed she was with her kids. I told myself this is what I need to do... be more relaxed about everything. That moment has really stuck with me!”

Colleague whose son is now grown
CHAPTER FOUR: LEARN

Our next step in the design process was to dig into the vast amount of data we accumulated during the engagement phase of our work. Every sticky, every note, every survey, every conversation—no matter how casual—was recorded and entered into our database. Except for the results from the Online Survey, all of our data were qualitative: the words, phrases, descriptions and stories provided by the many individuals who offered us their insights, ideas and experiences. We are humbled by and deeply grateful for the open and heartfelt contributions from everyone.

Methodology

We chose design thinking as our methodology for this project because it is an approach that is grounded in understanding human experience. We saw design thinking as a genuine and respectful way to meaningfully engage the people who matter to us, specifically, the parents and caring adults of Waterloo Region. We also saw it as a method to help us take what we learned and generate an innovative, experience-driven approach to parenting education. In order to do justice to the vast array of information we collected, however, we also grounded our work in a qualitative research framework. Qualitative inquiry is a natural match with design thinking as both preference human experience—and the telling of that experience—as the focus of study. Qualitative methods provide the vehicle by which the particulars of a single statement from a single individual can inform and shape our understanding of shared experience (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In our work, qualitative data analysis helped us take the individual experiences from our many contributors and develop a broader conceptual understanding of the needs and interests of parents; all the while staying rooted in those individual stories. There are many forms of qualitative exploration but we were most influenced by grounded theory. Grounded theory is both a methodology and a set of procedures for discovering the essence embedded in the details of experience (Glasser & Strauss, 2006/1967; Cutcliffe, 2005); the data analysis procedures of grounded theory provided the foundation for our data analysis. Qualitative approaches are also iterative in nature, meaning that questions, conversations and data collection methods build on each other, as learning and new insights occur. Our approach of building on what we were learning as we were learning it reflected both design thinking and qualitative inquiry methodologies.

Qualitative Data Analysis

At the outset, qualitative data analysis can feel daunting. It is a bit like stepping into a giant Ikea ball room, where every ball represents a single statement. In this room, rich with the poignant and personal statements of those who have shared their experiences, you must find the patterns among the statements and bring those patterns together into a meaningful and coherent whole. In our case, we were looking to
understand how parents gain their parenting skills and knowledge. However, utilizing grounded theory, we were also able to dig down into the experiences of parenting and discover the underlying influences and motivations that that shape how, what and why parenting education matters.

The first step in qualitative analysis is to become immersed in the data. We printed every comment, statement and story, cut them up into meaning units, and read them, over and over. We looked at commonalities and started grouping similar statements together. We labeled these groupings by the themes they depicted and then grouped themes together to form concepts. We re-read and continued to look for meaning and commonalities. Often, we re-grouped concepts as our understanding of the data grew. This was a very active and hands-on process, involving taping statements together onto sheets of paper, writing the emerging themes and grouping similar pages together. We colour coded key points and as our themes stared emerging we taped them to the walls to form broad categories. Eventually, our walls were filled with these detailed sheets of paper (a small sample of which is depicted in the photograph).

Grounded theory analysis is an intuitive process. This constant immersion in the data is necessary to both identify the patterns and linkages among the statements and then expand these commonalities into a broader understanding of what is being expressed. The first round of analysis—the initial themes—reflects the raw data, but as the analysis deepens, concepts and then major themes or categories are expressed as abstractions of the data. Table 1 provides a sample of our data analysis, depicting the progression from statements (data) to initial themes, concepts and major themes.
Table 1: Sample of data analysis, showing participant statements and emerging themes and concepts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Initial Theme</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Major Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being there for them, even in the middle of the night</td>
<td>Being the “go to” person when my child needs help</td>
<td>Being there for my kids, with help support, guidance, encouragement and comfort.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When child comes to me for comfort after falling</td>
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<tr>
<td>When my niece was arrested and called me for help</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When the children come to me with their problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When she comes to me with her problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>First one they run to for comfort—the routine things, bedtime, movies</td>
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<tr>
<td>When I am the go to person for help</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talk with my kids; Help with advice; Being supportive</td>
<td>Being available when my child needs help</td>
<td>Being available when my child needs help, comfort, encouragement</td>
<td>Being available when my child needs help, comfort, encouragement and comfort.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching them that their emotions are important and never dismiss them</td>
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<tr>
<td>When I can comfort my son; Being there when my child is in distress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saying I love you unconditionally in the most difficult situations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helping kid work through emotional hurts</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When I provide encouragement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having conversations with my children</td>
<td>Warm, loving conversations, sharing with each other</td>
<td>Feeling connected through open communication</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When we have good talks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When I am able to get across the message nicely and got positive feedback</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Having a “deep” conversation about her life</td>
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<tr>
<td>When my kids are communicating to me something personal</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When my teenage stepdaughter actually thanked me for the talk and for being approachable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When we open up about our feelings; When we talk about our day at dinner</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Night time discussions, routines; Honest answers about sex</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When they teach us something; Listening to how my kid’s day was</td>
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<tr>
<td>When they understand. When she gives me a huge hug after a long talk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actively listening, looking at each other; When I can listen without judging</td>
<td>Open, attentive listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting child’s perspective; Ask a question rather than react</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking children instead of giving lecture; Accept different choice, flexible</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding; When child is open to sharing thoughts/feelings</td>
<td></td>
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The Parenting Experience

While our “big” question was about how people gain their parenting skills and knowledge, our conversations were, simply, about parenting. As we talked with more and more people, we came to realize
that learning is present in almost all aspects of parenting. From the unexpected moments of insight to the intentional act of reaching out for support or guidance, our parenting skills and knowledge are continually changing and growing. We saw that in order to fully understand how that learning happens, we needed to understand the nature of the parenting experience—what the small and the big moments mean to us, what shapes who we are as a parent, what motivates us to learn and grow. As we became immersed in our data, in the statements and stories from the many parents and caring adults who contributed to our learning, the nature of the parenting experience began to emerge. We realized that understanding the parenting experience is crucial to understanding not only how and where parents learn but why the learning matters, in the first place.

At the very broadest level, three major themes were identified through our analysis. The first theme we called Being the Parent I Am as it captures the moment-to-moment experiences that define our sense of “the parent I am”. The second we called Becoming the Parent I Am as this one reflects the multiple influences and experiences that have shaped us into the parent we are. The third major theme we called Learning and Growing as a Parent as this theme captures how and why we learn and grow as parents. We saw each of these themes as interactive: parents (and parenting skills) are deeply influenced by a range of people and situations and, as our data revealed, both small and big moments stimulate learning and growth. Figure 2, below, depicts their inter-relationship; we elaborate on each category as this chapter progresses. The model presented below represents our conceptualization of the parenting experience we saw embedded in the data; it also formed the foundation for the key learnings we brought forward to the design stage of the project.

**Figure 2: The Parenting Experience**

- **Being the Parent I Am**
- **Becoming the Parent I Am**
- **Learning & Growing as a Parent**

**Being the Parent I Am**

In the Stakeholder Labs, we asked people to talk about the moments in parenting that captured being the parent you want to be. This led to an array of examples, rich with joy, delight, pride, love, togetherness and feelings of confidence and competence. We also asked people to talk about the other side of parenting, those moments when you are not the parent you want to be. This time, we heard about the moments filled with distress, frustration, embarrassment, disappointment or anger as well as feelings of incompetence, shame and regret. While these parenting moments were, at first, more difficult to talk about, we heard again and again from participants that it felt good to share them. A sense of commonality and feelings of
relief emerged through these conversations—that parenting is often full of struggle, that we are not always good at it nor are we always proud of the way we behave, and that it is a relief to know we are not the only one who has these experiences. We learned that these two kinds of moments—the delights and the distresses—share equally in the parenting experience and that any parent can move between these two moments, in a heartbeat.

We heard, quite clearly, that connection is at the heart of the parenting experience and we saw it as a defining characteristic of both the delights and distresses of parenting. Connection was about actions—about being connected through spending time together and doing things with each other. It was also about the feeling of being connected—feelings of warmth, understanding, love. The “flip side” is just as real and we heard that connection—disconnection—was just as much a part of the parenting experience. Disconnection was experienced in those moments of being preoccupied, critical or unavailable and generated feelings of frustration, shame, regret, powerlessness. Our model of Being the Parent I Am, presented below, attempts to depict the almost mirror image between those moments of connection and disconnection, delight and distress, that emerged so strongly in our data. We go on to describe each of these concepts in detail as this chapter progresses. We also heard, however, that parents are often deeply reflective about their own actions and feelings and that the nature of the parenting moment—whether one that generated feelings of delight or distress—influenced whether these very personal reflections were self-affirming or self-critical. We discuss these reflections as the chapter progresses, as well. Figure 3 depicts our emerging model.

Figure 3: Being the Parent I Am
**Being and Feeling Connected** The joys of parenting occur in the moments of loving connection with our children. When parents described being the parent they want to be, they described *time spent together, feeling happy, and sharing activities*. They described laughing and being silly together, reading together, or just hanging out either as a family or one-on-one. Playing, cooking, enjoying meals, going out, talking, even doing chores together were listed as fun moments of connection. One parent said “it’s the fun moments together, walking in the park, going for coffee or going to church together”; another said “it’s when I make and hear my kids belly-laugh”. *Enjoying the moments of warmth, affection and love* was another key aspect of being and feeling connected. Parents described the sense of warmth and love that comes with physical affection, snuggling, cuddling, holding hands or kissing. They talked about providing comfort and soothing for their child or about simply feeling connected in the moment. One parent stated, “it’s when we make a connection and I feel our bond”. A caring adult in our group said, “it’s when a child just comes up and takes my hand”. These are, indeed, moments of joy and delight.

Being and feeling connected was also reflected in comments that described the magic of *knowing and understanding each other*. These moments created a sense of delight in the shared connection. Parents described working together toward a shared goal or purpose, having an intuitive sense of what the other needed or wanted, or sharing personality traits and interests. One parent said, “it’s when we find solutions to problems and find support in each other”, while a caring adult wrote, “it’s when my nephew says, ‘my aunty knows what I mean’”. These moments carry a deeply felt sense of connection and an intuitive, heartfelt knowledge of shared understanding. Open and responsive communication also contributed to the feeling of connection these reciprocal moments created. Parents spoke about the joy of the “good talks”, the moments when a child opens up and shares his or her inner thoughts and feelings. One parent said, “it was when my teenage stepdaughter actually thanked me for the talk and for being approachable”. As this comment reflects, they also talked about their own skills in this moment, of being available, attentive, open and clear.

*Being there for their kids, with help, support, guidance, encouragement and comfort* was a very common theme among participant responses. Parents spoke about being the “go to person” when their child needed help. There was a sense of pride in this but also a sense that this is just what parents do. One parent said, “it’s just being there for them, even in the middle of the night”. It’s also about being available when kids come to them and providing the help or comfort the child is seeking. Parents also talked about being a positive role model to their children as part of being there for their child. They talked about the importance of taking responsibility for your own actions, remaining calm in stressful situations and being patient. One parent said, “it’s knowing that your child is learning from you how to handle emotions”. Another stated, “it’s being consciously kind and gentle when you are having a moment and just feel like losing it”. Providing age-appropriate supports and guidelines was another aspect of being there. Parents reflected on the importance of the limits that help to keep our children safe and which build feelings of trust. They talked about guiding children in making appropriate choices, learning independence and sharing in family chores.
and expectations. Being there for our kids, then, is about providing the foundation that builds safety, trust, and confidence.

**Being and Feeling Disconnected** The delights of parenting are the kinds of stories and moments that we like to share and to hear about. They are what most of us as parents seek—we want the fun times together, the warmth and affection, and the knowledge that we can be there when our children need us. Most of us have an inner sense of the parent we want to be and when we are in those moments, it simply feels good. But, as any parent knows, these are not the only moments of parenting. There is another side, an uncomfortable, distressing side. When we asked parents to reflect on those other moments—who they are not being the parent they want to be—we turned to the heart of the struggles and challenges of parenting. We also learned that it is in these moments when parents often reach for support and for learning.

Just as the joys and delights of parenting are about connection, so too are the challenges and distresses of parenting; except that now, they are about being and feeling disconnected. We noticed that themes in these conversations were almost mirror images of those from the other conversations. For instance, the joy of spending time together was mirrored by comments about being distant and unavailable. When asked about being the parent they do not want to be, one theme that emerged was about feeling distant, preoccupied or distracted, and not giving the attention the child needs or wants. Parents talked about feeling emotionally disconnected at times, of being absorbed in their own activities, of not paying attention or actively ignoring their children. One parent stated, “it’s when I am too rushed to listen” while another stated, “it’s when I don’t feel like being around them”. Another parent stated, “it’s like the time my kids were screaming on the bus. I was stressed and I just ignored them”. Another theme was behaving with judgment, criticism or disrespect toward the child. Parents recounted moments of discounting their children’s needs, feelings or perspectives, of jumping to conclusions or making assumptions about a situation with their child, of being rigid and controlling. One parent stated, “it’s when I show disrespect for their feelings” or another said “when I speak before listening”. Parents talked about reacting negatively to their children’s behaviour or behaving poorly toward them. They told us about reacting with anger and frustration, raising their voices, yelling or swearing, losing control and ‘freaking out’ or behaving with impatience and disrespect. They talked about the moments when their emotions took over and when they behaved as a poor role model for their children. One parent said, “it’s when I lose my patience and start to shout if I am angry about something”, while another said, “it’s not stopping myself and saying something I regret”. Indeed, many of these moments are followed by feelings of regret or feeling badly about the behaviour. One parent told us a story of rushing to get her little girl out the door in the morning. She knew her child was seeking something from her but she kept telling her to be quiet. Then she found out that all her daughter wanted was for mom to say “I love you”. This parent described a sense of shame and regret that most of us can readily identify with.

Parents talked about the range of negative and challenging behaviours their children display and how this impacts their sense of parenting. They talked about tantrums, lying, arguments over video games, hanging
with “bad people”, curfews not followed, poor school behaviour, defiance, disrespectful language, sibling conflict, fighting, bullying, stealing, constant attention seeking, interrupting, bossiness—the list goes on and on. Often these child behaviours led to feelings of embarrassment, frustration, disappointment, helplessness and uncertainty for the parent—and well represented those moments when the parent felt they were being the parent they did not want to be. Comments we heard include: “it’s when they fight with each other and don’t listen to me”, “when I am ashamed of my kid’s behaviour”, “when they show distrust of my opinion”, “when I feel disrespected”, and “when they do not listen”. Each of these comments carries a sense of helplessness and frustration.

Just as being there for their children was a common theme, so, too, were comments reflecting the opposite: not being there for my kids in the way that I would like to be. This theme conveyed a sense of letting kids down. Parents talked about forgetting an important event, not helping out when needed, or putting rules ahead of feelings. They talked about acting in selfish ways toward their children, taking their moods out on their children and disregarding how this affected their child. This theme conveyed a sense that the parent could or should have done more, but did not. One parent said, “it’s when I feel I should do more, but there is no time”. They also talked about putting their needs ahead of their children, of not putting their child first. One parent stated, “it’s when I put myself or the situation first, over my child’s needs”.

Reflecting on Me, the Parent I Am To this point, the themes discussed have described the moments between parent and child that are primarily about doing things with, for or to the children, about meeting or not meeting their needs; they are about the relationship between the parent and child and the moments that enrich or injure that relationship. However, parenting is also about the needs and experiences of the parent. At all levels of our engagement activities, we were awed by the self reflective stance that many parents adopted. Conversations about parenting are often—perhaps typically—focused on children; their behaviour, their accomplishments, their funny moments. When we asked parents to reflect on what it meant to be the parent they wanted to be or, conversely, what it meant to be the parent they did not want to be, they openly and bravely shared their reflections about themselves and described how their interactions with their children reflected the kind of parent they felt they were being, in that moment.

On the joyful side of parenting, we heard how parents delighted in their children—and how this delight in their child also created feelings of pride in themselves. They talked about feeling proud when their child behaved in a way that reflected their values or when they developed a skill they had taught the child. One parent said, “it’s when they use their manners, I think ‘I did that!’ I taught them to do that” while another said, “It makes me feel proud when I see that my child can do something that I taught her to do. Makes me feel like a good parent”. Parents also reflected on creating opportunities for their child to shine or bearing witness to their child’s accomplishment; there is a sense that as their child shines, so do they. One parent said, “being the parent I want to be is when my child tells me about her good grades”, another said, “it’s when I identify the unique strengths of each child and then help them to develop themselves”. These are inner, private moments of self-pride and delight, but feeling valued and appreciated by others are also part of the joyful moments of parenting. Parents talked about getting compliments from others on their
parenting skills and on their child’s accomplishments. One parent said, “it’s when people tell you good things about your kids” while another said, “When people tell me I am doing a good job at parenting, they stick in your mind because it doesn’t happen that often”. Parents talked about feeling appreciated and valued by their children, as well. When they say ‘thank you’, ‘I love you’ or write a nice note. One parent said, “it’s when they are happy to see you when you come home”. We own these moments! They are as much about us as they are about our children.

This self-reflective delight can easily turn to self-criticism when the distressful side of parenting emerges, however. We heard from parents about feeling disappointed, upset or ashamed of their child’s behaviour and that these behaviours conveyed a lack of respect for their parenting, and, by extension, themselves. Parents talked about feeling taken advantage of, being embarrassed by their child, of feeling disrespected and powerless and not behaving well themselves when these moments occur. They feel disappointed in and ashamed of themselves, as they feel disappointed in and ashamed of their children. These are very difficult feelings and we heard a need to seek self-forgiveness, as well. One parent said, “it’s how to be ok with these moments when you feel you have not done your best job” while another parent said, “it’s when I neglect them. Neglect is a hard word to describe not having enough time. Finding balance is a better way to describe it”. Embedded in all of these moments, are feelings of incompetence, uncertainty and powerlessness. There are so many moments when parents simply do not know what to do, when they lack skills, knowledge or understanding, and these contribute to feeling disappointed and ashamed. As one parent said “it’s when you just don’t know what else to do” and another said, “it’s about feeling bad about getting upset when my children are upset”. Another parent said, quite simply, “it’s about feeling guilty”.

Often these difficult moments occur when the parent is feeling tired, overwhelmed and pulled in too many directions, when there are “just too many tasks on my plate”. At these moments, it can be very difficult to reach out for help, even though these are the moments when we most need it. Parents talked about often feeling criticized and judged in these moments and how this made them feel badly about themselves. One parent told us a story about being out with her two young children and one of them was crying incessantly. She told us she had tried all kinds of strategies to comfort him, but nothing was working. An older man walked by and she felt that he looked at her very critically. She told us that that look really affected her and commented, “I already felt bad enough about my parenting. I didn’t need his criticism!” Lack of support and feeling unappreciated or valued seem quite salient in these moments. Parents talked about feeling alone and isolated in their distress, of feeling that others are so much better at parenting than they are. They expressed feeling their efforts often went unappreciated and in their frustration, they sometimes lash out at their kids, as one parent said, “it’s about becoming upset with myself and not listening to my child”.

**Being the Parent I Am: Summary** Parenting is a tough job—it is also a very unique one. Being the parent we want to be is not just about gaining skills and knowledge, it is about qualities, emotions and beliefs deep within ourselves that can be challenged or reinforced, at any given moment. The people who participated in our Stakeholder Labs, told us very clearly about the interrelationship between the joys and distresses of parenting. They also told us, just as clearly, how these moments reflected their innermost sense of self.
During the Stakeholder Labs, we had also asked if learning parenting skills was different from learning any other skill. Participants had a range of responses to this question but a common theme was that learning about parenting is as much about learning about ourselves as it is about learning a specific skill. Self-reflection and self-awareness are vital to becoming the parent we want to be; as one parent commented “because so much is riding on your decisions and how you conduct yourself”. These can be difficult and at times painful moments of self-discovery but as one parent told us, “my kids deserve it!” Being the Parent I Am is an intensely, naturally and emotionally “self-centred” experience of self-reflection and self-criticism, where the quality of the moment is assessed through the eyes of their children, the people around them and their own actions and feelings. It’s a personal, life-long journey of joys, distresses, successes and mistakes—and learning, constant learning. As the parent in the quote above says, “I don’t think you can avoid that as a parent”.

**Becoming the Parent I Am**

We asked people to talk to us about the influences that have shaped their parenting. They talked about the influences that shaped them becoming the parent they want to be as well as those that shaped those moments of being the parent they did not want to be. Like the intimate interplay between the joys and distresses of parenting, influences shift equally between those that help, guide and support, and those that do not. We heard that people were influenced by the way they were raised, by the people around them, by qualities within themselves and by their children. These were all interconnected, rich with experiences of emotion, inspiration and discovery. Figure 4 depicts our conceptualization of these influences; each is discussed below.

**Figure 4: Becoming the Parent I Am**

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"If I were pregnant now, I would like to think I would fix the things I did wrong the first time...but I would probably just make different mistakes. I don’t think you can avoid that as a parent."

Parent of four teen/young adults
Influenced by How I was Raised Many, many people told us that the biggest influence on their parenting was the way that they were raised. Often these were positive reflections, as people reflected on the skills they gained from the way that they were parented as children or the kind of advice and support they currently receive from their parents. They often talked about their parents as positive role models or about striving to be like their parents. One parent told us, “I figure I am a good person so my parents did a good job. I will do it like they did it and my daughter will be a good person, too.” Other people talked about learning what ‘not to do’ from the way they were raised; they talked about feeling determined to do things differently or offering their children “the opposite of what we had”. We did not hear people “blaming” their parents or their upbringing, rather, they were reflective and expressed feeling motivated to simply do better, if they could. One person captured the complex nature of these experiences by saying, “I learned from past mistakes, the mistakes my parents made and the mistakes I have made”.

Influenced by the People around Me Friends, family, neighbours, spouses, co-workers, support workers, medical practitioners, counsellors—the list of people who influence our parenting skills and knowledge is a long one. Participants talked about the key relationships in their lives and what these relationships meant to their parenting. Often, it was about the value of emotional support and how this helped ease them through the difficulties of parenting. We heard that with this kind of support, people felt better able to cope with the challenges they were facing. One parent said, “When you have an emotional connection with people, like your family or your church, you are influenced by them, they make you into a good parent.” People talked about turning to their friends and family for advice; although also being discerning about the advice received. As one parent said, “I listen to the advice people give me, but not too much. I still decide what will fit for my family.” We often heard that people are influenced by their faith and their cultures. They talked about praying for guidance and receiving support through their communities of worship. Similarly, they talked about the importance of their cultures and customs for their parenting practices and the challenges of adapting to Canadian customs. One parent told us, “My daughter does not work hard at school now. In our country, they have to do lots of homework but not here. I need help to get her to do more work.”

Finally, we heard from participants that they are influenced by other parents; people they know but also any other parent they might bump into or happen to watch parenting their own children. Some people talked about intentionally surrounding themselves with positive role models, with people who parent in ways they would like to or who have skills they want to emulate. One parent told us, “I try to surround myself with other parents who are doing it the way I want, being the kind of parent I want to be.” Others talked about watching other parents do something they liked and then copying that behaviour or intentionally watching a parent who has “been there” through a similar situation or whose children are older. These experienced parents serve as unwitting but very inspiring guides. Sometimes parents learn what not to do when watching other parents and are discerning, just as they are with advice. One parent told us, “If I see someone smoking beside their kids, I tell myself to never let my kid experience anything like that.” In the end, though, connecting with another person, whether for advice, support or socialization, can help ease the stress of parenting and help people feel better able to deal with their challenges. It’s helpful to know
Influenced by Who I Am

Just as parents talked about their sense of self when describing the Parent I Am, they talked about the personal qualities, beliefs, and skills that influence their parenting. Patience, or the need to develop patience, was mentioned again and again. Self-awareness, openness, respectfulness, thoughtfulness, flexibility, and understanding were also qualities listed as those that make a difference in parenting. Many expressed feeling that the possession of these qualities helped to influence those moments of being the parent they want to be, and conversely, the absence of these qualities led to the other, more challenging moments in parenting. “My attitude” was frequently mentioned, again, as something that could take the moment in either direction. It is worthy to note that, as researchers, we were in awe of the open, honest and self-reflective stance taken by our participants. Many seemed to readily dig into and explore what it was about themselves, as parents that influenced their parenting behaviours. We learned so much from their courage and their vulnerability as they told us their stories. Indeed, many also spoke directly about the value of allowing themselves to be vulnerable as a parent, of admitting to being wrong, uncertain, ashamed… human. One parent said, “It’s admitting you have a problem, saying ‘I’m wrong’.” Being open about struggling, sharing that struggle with someone and hearing that someone else is struggling, too, eases the distress and, for many, creates feelings of hope and possibility. One parent said, “Being together, with others in similar experiences is helpful. I’m not alone, others have experienced this.” Another said, “After talking, I don’t know exactly what to do, but I think I can do it”.

Part of being influenced by “who I am as a parent” encompasses a parent’s motivation for and commitment to being the parent they want to be. Participants talked about the importance of working hard at “getting good at this”. They mentioned willingness as an important characteristic; they talked about the need to be willing to learn, to try new things, to be open to feedback and to take ownership for your choices. They also talked about the effort required for parenting; it included persistence, practice, time management, goal setting and “getting off your butt”. Being the parent you want to be is not a passive act, it is continuously hard work that is often laced with moments of painful self-discovery. Fortunately, for most, the rewards of parenting outweigh these challenging moments. Again and again, participants told us that their primary motivation for being the parent they want to be is their children. We heard comments such as, “my child deserves the best from me” and “so my kids can grow to be happy and productive” from many participants. Parenting matters because our kids matter; the effort is worth it because our kids are worth it.

Influenced by My Children

Not only are children at the heart of our motivation and commitment to be the parent we want to be, they also influence who we are as a parent. Many participants talked about various qualities within their children that influence their parenting. Children with challenging behaviours or temperaments, unique medical or learning needs, or different developmental levels, influence parenting in different ways. Parents often talked about having to learn very specific skills or needing to access specific services in order to care for their children. One parent said, “My son with special needs takes more effort and time, I have to keep an eye on him more than the others.” They talked about trying to keep up with you are not alone and that others go through the same things. One parent told us, “At the end of the day, I always needed another adult to talk to, about my kids or about anything. It helped me face the next day.”
their developing children and often, learning right along with them. One parent said, “My child motivates me to learn. I want to learn about what she is learning and I want to learn about how to do it right with her.” Having more than one child is a big influence on parenting and navigating the individual needs of each child requires considerable skill and knowledge. Regardless of the context, however, many parents mentioned their love for their children as one of their biggest influences. That love motivates and rewards every action they take.

**Becoming the Parent I Am: Summary**

Parenting is influenced in so many ways. In this section, we talked about the common themes we heard people saying. However, other thoughts, about influences outside a parent’s personal circle, were also mentioned by participants. The subtle, societal pressures to be “the perfect parent”, the expectations that there is one right way to parent, or the random comments or gestures from strangers—these all influence parenting, both positively and negatively. As we have learned through our analysis, becoming the parent I am involves tremendous effort to develop the skills and knowledge needed to raise happy and healthy children. It does not stop there, however. We also heard that becoming the parent I am involves intense and often painful self-reflection. These added, external, societal pressures feel so unfair. “Society” can be critical of today’s parents but, as the quote here depicts, kindness goes a long way.

**Learning and Growing as a Parent**

The third component of the Parenting Experience is specifically about the learning itself. Throughout our analysis, we have heard that learning in parenting is a continuous activity; that it is, at times, intentional but that it is also very often accident and surprising. This section, Learning and Growing as a Parent, looks specifically at how that learning occurs, who are the ‘teachers’, why the learning matters and, finally, the values that parents seek from their sources of learning. Parents truly had a lot to say about their learning experiences and throughout our engagement activities we heard about two central and common experiences in their learning: one was that parents learn first and foremost through connection with others, the second was that they learn through exploration and observation. We also heard that the learning process is often informal, occurring in any location and at any moment, it is incidental, occurring unexpectedly or by accident, and that these informal, incidental moments are often tremendously inspiring. These descriptions of learning and growing as a parent form the key components of our model, depicted in Figure 5, below.
Figure 5: Learning and Growing as a Parent

Why Learning Matters
- Make things better for self and family
- Become a better parent
- Improve my skills and knowledge

Learning through Connection with Others
- Supportive, reciprocal relationships
- Groups, seminars, courses
- Community resources
- Social media, interactive websites

Learning through Exploration and Observation
- Personal experience, trial and error
- Watching others
- Videos, demonstrations
- Research, reading, asking questions

I Learn from
- Experts
- Friends and family
- Experienced parents
- My children

Learning opportunities that
- Reflect my values and beliefs
- Honour my relationships
- Honour my faith and culture
- Honour diversity

Why Learning Matters Throughout the other sections, the motivations for becoming the best parent they can have been discussed. When we asked people to talk specifically about their learning process as a parent, more details emerged. As one parent said, “learning is a key component of parenting” and many told us that they seek new knowledge and skill in order to “be a good parent”. They told us that they hoped that new learnings would help them gain more confidence in their parenting as well as to feel more calm, relaxed and peaceful. All of this was in order to make things better for themselves and their families and to be a better parent. They also talked about wanting to directly improve their skills and knowledge or to keep abreast of new information. As one parent said, “I want to understand how a child’s brain works!” There is much to keep up with in parenting, many theories, ideas, approaches and strategies. Navigating these requires time as well as the ability to pick and choose that which will work within their own parenting context. One parent told us she wished there was a “handbook that outlines everything” and another said, “I wish the answers could just be in my brain, already.” They know that learning takes time and effort but they dig in and do it anyway—because the learning makes a difference in the kind of parent they are.
Learning through Connection with Others We have already heard about the importance of the key relationships people have in their lives and the tremendous influence these relationships have on parenting. *Connection with others* also featured strongly in our conversations that were specific to the learning process. Participants talked about the learning that happens through the supportive relationships in their lives, the trusted people they turn to with questions about how to handle a specific situation or where to go for additional help. They talked about the reciprocal nature of these conversations, as they help each other with their challenges. Participants also talked about more formal kinds of learning, those they experienced in parenting groups, seminars or courses. There is value in the knowledge gained in these sessions, as one parent said, “The groups I have been to have given me knowledge, making me a better parent.” But “knowledge” is only one small component of the importance of parenting groups. We heard again and again that getting together with people in similar circumstances and who have similar learning goals was as impactful as gaining knowledge. It is in the relationships and the connections that learning occurs, through “building a community of likeminded parents”. There is also opportunity for self care in these groups, as one parent nicely summed up, “Parenting classes or parenting groups are not just for getting knowledge, they are also for getting a break.” Parenting courses and groups often are offered by community services and we heard that people see these and other resources offered through community agencies as highly valuable to their parenting. Community resources often provide specific and needed help or can facilitate the formal learning process but they are also about “connecting with other moms like me”. Parents frequently told us that they wished these services and resources were more widely available.

Social media and other online resources also factored into how parents learn through connection with others. Parents talked about the internet as an essential communication tool to reach out to others. It is something that is always available, as one parent said, “it’s there 24/7”. It is also convenient, a resource that is readily available during those rare times when a parent has a few moments to her or himself. Often this is when their kids are occupied with something else, as one parent said, “I go to my phone when my kids are occupied, like watching a movie”. The ready availability of the internet really matters, particularly when parents need help or support during hours when services are closed or their friends and family are unavailable. Facebook, Twitter, websites, blogs….are always on and there is always someone to reach out to, even if it is just leaving a message. They search for other parents, for people who will understand, “get it”. One parent stated, “Other parents are a good source of information online because they have experienced it and are not going to judge you.” While another said, “I search the internet and look for parent forums where parents are talking to each other.” She added the need to be discerning, however, “I look through all the different things said and figure out what is right for me.” The internet—and all that it offers—provides a valuable space for parents to connect with and learn through others.

Learning through Observation and Exploration Parents told us that they need to engage directly in their learning. They need input into what they are learning and control over how they are learning it; they told what works best for them. To begin, they told us that they learn through their own experiences, and this means “trial and error”. They learn through their mistakes or through the mistakes of others. One parent
told us “I learn after I have done it wrong a few times.” They also learn through trying something that they have seen another parent do. They described watching a parent at a soccer game or on the bus and being impressed by what they witnessed. When they got home and tried it for themselves, they were often pleasantly surprised by how it worked. One parent told us, “you see people doing some things with their kids and you want to do that, too.” Another parent told us, “I watch parents whose kids are older. If the kids are good kids, I think they (the parent) know what they are doing.” As we have already noted, these learning moments stick with us—and sometimes change us. We also heard that videos, demonstrations, or role plays are helpful tools for parents in their learning. While they may not quite have the impact the direct observation of another parent has, they truly aid the learning process. As one parent said, “I like seeing videos or movies about raising kids. Sometimes, by watching it, it prints on your brain better. I get the ideas more quickly by watching it.”

Parents also told us that they learn through exploration. Many like to do their own research when they have a specific topic they want to learn. They go online and investigate websites, they explore different ‘experts’ to find out who best fits with their learning needs, they read books and they ask questions. Some are very persistent, as one parent said, “I search and search and search until I get the answer I need.” They told us that, while they like—sometimes—to read about theory and research, they are typically looking for practical “techniques, methods, strategies and what to do in my situation”. In a book, some people flip to the parts that speak to their immediate needs or on a website go directly to the comments section. They told us that the comments from other parents are a vital part of how they use the website and can influence whether or not they even read the article. One parent told us, “I look at the title of the article then go straight to the comments. I see what other parents think of it. Sometimes, I don’t even bother reading the whole article.” This is yet more evidence of the discerning lens parents bring to their learning experiences. Whether online or in-person, it seems they have clear goals for their learning and want information that fits their needs and interests.

I Learn from... Who are their “teachers”? We have already heard that they learn from friends and family, from other parents, and from experts. Interestingly, we heard that the experts they most turn to are those who identify being a parent, as well. This makes the expert seem more trustworthy and real. One parent said, “I will look at what experts say, but feel they don’t always get it because maybe they are not parents and have not experienced it.” We learned that it is not always what the information is about that is important; rather it is about how the information is conveyed. One parent said, “I am not necessarily looking for a proven strategy—I’m looking for someone who has had a similar experience, what they did and why it worked. Then I can try to replicate it.” Again, it is about practical, usable and trustworthy information. Similarly, we heard that parents look to experienced parents for learning. While we did not get a specific definition of an experienced parent, we heard words such as “been there”, “experienced”, “trustworthy” and “approachable” to describe the qualities they are seeking in a more experienced parenting “guide”. One parent said, “when I have a question about parenting, I ask others who have older children how they handled the challenges.” For many, their parents are the “experienced parents” they turn
to for advice and information, but many others turn to people in their own social networks, or to community resources.

We heard that children are teachers, too and that parents learn both from their own kids and the kids around them. Children influence parents through their behaviour and temperament and through the motivation they bring to parenting. They also teach us. Parents talked about their kids teaching them what works best, why something works and when it is time to try something new. One parent said, “when I really listen to my child, it usually works out”. Parents also learn from other kids. It might be when they are caring for a friend’s child and that child says or does something that triggers a new insight or it is simply watching other children and learning from their behaviour. One parent said, “I observe older children and discuss their behaviour with my partner”.

**Learning Opportunities Need to Reflect what is Important to Me** Parents told us that they turn to learning opportunities and resources that reflect their personal values and beliefs. We heard that they want to hear positive messages, they want to experience hope and optimism, they want to feel heard and understood, and they want to feel that what they are learning helps them to stay true to the their sense of self and their values for their families. Parents told us that they want their learning opportunities to honour their relationships. They want to feel that their children, partners and other family members are treated with respect and care by their teachers and by the information that is being taught. Similarly, they want the learning to honour their faith and culture, and they want learning to honour diversity. We believe this means that people are seeking learning opportunities that are based in respect for all individuals and are inclusive of all beliefs, customs, genders, sexual or gender orientations and abilities.

**Learning and Growing as a Parent: Summary** Parenting is a life-long journey and it seems that learning and growing as a parent is woven into every step on that journey. Parents are learning through the moment to moment experiences of parenting, they learn through conversations with their friends and families, they learn through watching other parents, they learn through experts, and they learn through their children and other children. We heard that learning can be informal and incidental and that there are many big and small moments of insight and inspiration that can stick with us for a lifetime. Learning matters because our kids matter and getting good at parenting is something worth getting good at. Embedded in all these messages is a shared value for being the best parent we can be. We heard, in so many ways, that being the best parent possible is what we all seem to desire. Some of us are better at it than others, but the underlying value seems to be there for everyone.

**The Parenting Experience: Summary**

Being a parent, becoming that parent and continuing to learn and grow as a parent are complex experiences, each laced with intense emotions, hard-earned skills, illuminating self-discovery and an array of helpful and not-so-helpful relationships. The stories we heard and the insights we gained from these stories form the foundation for the learning we took forward into the next phase of this project, in the
Design phase. As noted before, each step in our Engagement process built on the learnings we gained from the previous step. We developed our model of the parenting experience from the conversations we had with parents and caring adults during our Stakeholder Labs, our Street Team Surveys and our random discussions with friends, co-workers, community partners and interested individuals. These were all personal narratives to which we applied a qualitative analysis in order to understand the common themes and concepts.

In addition to the experiential nature of our inquiry, we were also curious about concepts that started with phrases such as “how many people...?” or “how often do they ....?” or “what is the most ....?” To this end, we developed an online survey. Our intention was to learn more details of the learning experience, within the context of these quantitative concepts. The following section describes what we learned from this analysis.

**Online Survey: How do you prefer to learn your Parenting Skills and Knowledge?**

The survey was launched, via Survey Monkey, on October 1, 2015 and remained open until November 30, 2015. At the outset of the survey, participants were informed about the purpose of the survey, the research being informed through the survey and that their responses would form part of a report to the community. They were also informed about how to get more information about the study. All participants were invited to enter a draw for a $25 gift certificate to Tim Horton’s as an incentive.

We received a total of 211 responses to the survey. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 74, with the majority of respondents (75%) between the ages of 25 and 44. 85% of respondents identified themselves as a parent or caregiver, 12% identified as a future parent and 35% identified as a caring adult (one who supports, nurtures or cares for a child who is not their own). Finally, the vast majority of respondents (86%) reported they resided in a city, 10% said they live in a small town and 2% said they live in the country. No other demographic information was collected. We were particularly interested in reaching and learning from those who live in rural locations, however, connecting with this vast and diverse group of parents has been an ongoing challenge for us. As we move forward with the next stages of our project, connecting with rural parents will be a priority.

We began by asking participants about the learning resources they are most interested in. As Table 2, below shows, respondents expressed interest in all of the options presented, although the least favoured were formal mentoring, listening to podcasts and attending online courses. The most popular options, preferred by 80% or more of respondents, included learning from their strong personal relationships, their children, and going online. Practical hands-on learning as well as personal experience/trial and error learning was also preferred by at least 80% of respondents.
Table 2: Percentage of parents interested in learning from specific learning resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Resource</th>
<th>Interested</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Not Interested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong personal relationships (friends, family)</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your / the child</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online (videos, blogs, social media, reading, etc)</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical hands on learning</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience / trial and error</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading expert parenting literature</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In person courses/workshops</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching others</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending discussion groups</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal mentoring</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next we asked people to tell us about the kinds of online resources they go to when they are looking for parenting information. Responses varied between often, sometimes and never but, overall, Facebook was identified as the most frequent source for parenting information with 74% of respondents stating they use Facebook. Online course, podcasts, webinars and Twitter were least preferred. Table 3 presents the summary of parent activity when they go online for parenting information.

Table 3: Parent online activity when looking for parenting information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Resource</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert parenting literature</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment sections on blogs or articles</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forums / discussion boards</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile apps</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webinars</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In many of our conversations about online activity, parents frequently mentioned the need to be discerning about the information obtained online. With this in mind, we asked survey respondents to tell us how satisfied they feel with the online resources they utilize. The vast majority of respondents stated they feel
satisfied with the information they receive from expert parenting literature. Many also said that they feel satisfied with online videos, blogs, discussion boards and comments sections, although responses were more varied for these resources. 59% of people stated they are satisfied with the information they receive on Facebook. We found this result somewhat surprising, given the high proportion of people who stated they use Facebook for parenting information. Facebook provides the opportunity to share experiences, tips and strategies as well as links to other resources and information. It may be that the primary value of Facebook is its capacity to create the online connections that enable the sharing of parenting information. Table 4 presents a summary of parents’ satisfaction with the information they receive from various online sources.

Table 4: Satisfaction with parenting information found online

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Not Satisfied</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expert parenting literature</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forums / discussion boards</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment sections on blogs or articles</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webinars</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile apps</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We asked parents to tell us if there are specific learning resources or opportunities that they would like to learn from but don’t. The most frequent answer was that people said they would like to attend an in-person course or workshop (47%) or a discussion group (45%) but do not. The barriers to attending these sessions or groups are presented in Table 5. We categorized the barriers as Accessibility Barriers (external factors that prevent accessing this resource) and Personal Barriers (internal factors that prevent accessing this resource). The biggest barrier identified by respondents was time, they reported that they simply do not have enough time in their schedules to attend these programs or that the programs are offered at inconvenient times.
Table 5: Barriers to accessing learning resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessibility Barriers</th>
<th>Percent Responses</th>
<th>Personal Barriers</th>
<th>Percent Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The time it is scheduled for</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>No time in my schedule</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know where to find it</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Worried I will be judged</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>The options I found don’t fit my needs</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not available to me</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Intimidation / fear</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Too complicated / confusing</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>Literacy / language barrier</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of our Key Learnings

Through our engagement with parents and other adults who are involved with the children in their lives, we amassed a vast amount of data. Our analyses helped us identify the salient themes as expressed by our participants and from this we developed our working model of The Parenting Experience. We learned that learning is infused into all aspects of parenting and is as much a part of the parenting experience as the delight felt when a child snuggles up and says ‘I love you’ or the distress that is experienced when a child is having a tantrum in the grocery store. Our results were consistent with many of the results found by other researchers discussed earlier in this report, particularly as they reinforce that parents learn in connection with other parents. Even when going online, we heard, just as clearly as other researchers, that parents look to each other for support and learning—and will actively create or pursue opportunities to connect with another parent. These connections happen in formal groups as well as informal gatherings; they provide moments of relief, of inspiration, of learning and of encouragement. This was a very compelling result to us and became the primary influence in the next stages of our design process. Our key learnings are summarized on the following page.

Before moving on, it is important to acknowledge the experiences and input from the caring adults and youth who contributed to this study. At an early stage in the analysis, we colour coded the responses that we knew came directly from those who are not currently a parent. We noticed, however, that their experiences were thematically very like those of parents. They reported the same kind of delight in their connections and the same kinds of distress in the disconnections; they talked about learning through observation and practical experience. In writing about our findings, we have opted to use the more general language of ‘parent’ and ‘parenting’, and we have considered the experiences of caring adults and future parents within these concepts. As we move forward with the implementation of this project, we will introduce learning topics that may be more specific to the activities of these more diverse groups (e.g., grandparenting or building relationships for coaches).
KEY LEARNINGS

Parenting is a delicate balance of delight and distress. That balance can and does shift in an instant and both weight equally in the parenting experience.

Parenting is intensely “self-reflective”: parents assess the quality of their experiences through the eyes of their children, the people around them and their own actions and feelings.

Parenting is an ever developing capacity, influenced by how we were raised; by our personal qualities and abilities; by watching and learning from others, including our children; and through support from the people in our lives.

Parents turn to sources such as books, courses and websites for information but to each other for learning.

Learning and growing as a parent is primarily an informal experience; it is often incidental and occurs without intention when we watch others, hear or read something and suddenly gain insight into our own parenting; when we become aware of these moments of insight or learning, they are inspiring and stick with us.

Parents learn best through connection with other parents, exploration and observation, practical and useful ideas, and when diversity is valued.
This chapter describes our journey from curiosity and learning to design and prototyping. Once the engagement and data analysis steps are completed, design thinking methodology is a continual process of “ideating”, seeking feedback, prototyping, and testing...then doing it all over again. As ideas began to take shape (in the form of early prototypes), we turned to our key stakeholders for their feedback and incorporated the feedback into our next iteration of the concept. At each stage, we remained grounded in our learning of the parenting experience and when in doubt, we went back to our data, just to remind ourselves what parents and others told us of their learning experiences. Each of these steps was guided by the expertise and insights of the Overlap team.

**Defining the “Problem Space”**

Our first step was to sift through our findings from the engagement phase and synthesize our conceptualization of the data into our key learnings. A “journey mapping” process was also undertaken, exploring what it is like to access our current parenting education programs. The purpose of the journey mapping was to gain further insight into participant experience with our existing service, challenge assumptions about user experience, and use this information to help us shape our overall understanding of participant needs. From this, we created “empathy profiles”, descriptions of people who seek parenting education. The profiles were composites of the people who attend parenting education (based on our experience with our existing parenting programs). Three examples of these profiles are presented below. In all, eight profiles were created and became part of the parenting experience information for our Ideation Labs. The photo on the left captures how we presented this information to participants.

**Empathy Profiles**

**“Dylia”** Dylia is a 37 year old single mom of twins, Amira and Atiya, aged 8. Dylia wants to be an involved parent but is busy coordinating work schedules, childcare, meals and transportation. She wants quick and easy access to information on child development when her kids are occupied. She often feels alone and overwhelmed. Dealing with a custody battle leaves her without time or financial security. She has been told that she needs to spend time with her children and reduce her stress but she wonders, “how can I possibly do that?!”. She does not want to be told she is she’s not doing it right. She wants support to learn.

**“Doug”** Doug is a 33 year old parent, married to Sue. They have two children, their son, Riley is 10 and their daughter, Mel is 7. Doug started going to parenting classes...
because he and Mel butt heads a lot. He feels he cannot deal with her very well and is upset with himself for losing his temper with her. He has been reading about how dads matter to kids and he wants to be one of those dads. His wife is also a motivator because she says ‘this is not how we want to raise our kids’. Doug and Sue have a positive relationship and he often turns to her for support when he is struggling with Mel. He is employed and enjoys positive and supportive relationships with extended family. He feels ‘we have it all, I want to get this right, too!’ Doug comes to parenting workshops for good, research-based information. He wants specific tools, from an expert who can prove it will work. He is worried he might be the only Dad in the class.

“Christy” Christy is a 28 year old woman, married to Jenn. They have two children; Emily aged 2 and Sarah, aged 4. Christy is looking for a safe learning space where she will feel respected. She wants to talk about general parenting concepts but she would also like to talk about LGBTQ issues. She feels that parenting education is often structured around traditional family configurations and she is looking for something that is welcoming and less stereotyped. Christy’s marriage is strong but she has found that supports have been missing for her and Jenn particularly through the getting pregnant/adoption and early parenting stages. They both feel that there are not enough resources for LGBTQ parents in Waterloo Region and they often have to go to Toronto for the support they need. Christy is happy to learn from any parent. She is interested in classes that teach proactive skills and how to deal with early childhood challenges. She also wants her parenting concerns to be respected and listened to.

How might we?

Using the key learnings from our engagement activities and the insights gained through the journey mapping activities, we entered another phase of curiousity. Over several sessions with our project staff (KW Counselling Services and Overlap) we brainstormed the range of ideas, experiences, and problems that have arisen and what these might mean for a new approach to parenting education. We dug into our data so that we would stay grounded in the experiences and concerns of parents. But we also brought fresh eyes to the data, questioning our conclusions and wondering about other concerns not yet raised. This process allowed us to make new connections among concepts and helped us to prioritize the directions that were emerging from our data. We began to imagine how we might start to address these issues.
At the beginning of the design stage, it is important to “cast a wide net” and catch as many ideas as possible. In our early stage of problem definition, we generated a large number of “problems” expressed in the form of a question that began with “How might we....” For example, we asked “How might we integrate online learning with the need for connection with other parents?” or “How might we help parents apply what they have learned in meaningful ways?” We compared, combined and re-imagined the problems until we had prioritized five key questions to be brought forward to the design teams. These five questions created the context for our next step, design. They included:

1. **HOW MIGHT WE draw attention to the moments for learning that are continually present and all around us through:**
   - a. interactions with friends, neighbours and family?
   - b. moment to moment interactions with our children?
   - c. observation of ‘random strangers’ (e.g., at the grocery store, a soccer game, etc)?

2. **HOW MIGHT WE shape and influence society to:**
   - a. be attentive to the positive parenting moments that are all around us?
   - b. be respectful and supportive of parents in their struggles?
   - c. develop the skills to support the parents around them?

3. **HOW MIGHT WE build our parenting education so that connection is at the heart of the learning experience:**
   - a. with others?
   - b. with self?
   - c. over time?

4. **HOW MIGHT WE create opportunities to combine trial and error learning with practical and meaningful feedback from others?**

5. **HOW MIGHT WE create materials, spaces and activities that are inspiring and accessible?**
Casting a Wide Net—Initial Design Ideas

Through a series of “Design Labs” we brought together key stakeholders (including parents, youth and caring adults) and community partners to begin the design work. During the first Design Lab, participants were presented with an overview of the project activities, a summary of our findings, including the key learnings, and the empathy profiles. All of our information, including the raw data and early concept formulations, were put on display and participants were invited to look over the information before beginning the design process. They were then broken into small teams (four people per team) and presented with one How Might We question and one or two empathy profiles. Teams discussed the challenges and problems as presented by their profiles and questions and through a facilitated process generated multiple solutions. The emphasis at this point was to gather as many solutions or ideas as possible. Participants were invited to dream and asked to set aside any barriers to achieving their solutions, to vision the future of parenting education. Two subsequent, although somewhat smaller scale labs were held in which participants engaged in a similar process. We found that many ideas from the first lab were repeated in these second labs and this helped us select our initial prototypes. In all, over 30 different ideas were generated through the three design labs. Our next step was to evaluate these ideas and begin to prototype.

Prototyping

When we began to learn about design thinking, it was difficult to imagine what a “prototype” for this project might look like. We could readily imagine a prototype for a new type of chair or one for a vehicle of the future, but parenting education? That was hard to conceptualize. Fortunately, our partners at Overlap knew that, with their tools and coaching, and the input from our many participants, we would get there. A prototype is simply a way of conceptualizing emerging themes into actionable ideas. For instance, one of the early prototypes was for an online parenting game, where parents could try out different approaches and learn, through trial and error, what works best for them. Another was to create a team of “parent ambassadors” that would be present in locations where parents gather and provide ‘random acts of kindness’ to parents. We were amazed by the range of creative and visionary ideas generated through the ideating phase, however, it was necessary that we whittle the list into manageable solutions. Through discussion among our leadership team and grounded in the learning we gained through the engagement activities and the input from participants in the Design Labs, we identified four key prototype ideas to bring forward for testing. These are described below. It is worth noting that all of the ideas generated at these labs remain “on the table” and may be infused into the activities of this project, as the prototypes are further developed and implemented.
Today I Learned Building on the concept that parents learn from each other, this prototype included ideas of developing a Facebook page that contained parent-interest stories of learning. The idea included opportunities for parents to comment on the stories they were reading as well as a vehicle for submitting their own stories. It was suggested as a “Humans of New York”-style model. Other ideas that enhanced this theme included creating stories that draw attention to the incidental learning that surrounds us as well as stories with that attempt to decrease the judgment and stigma of “poor parenting” with the theme “I am that parent, too”.

Parent Chat—Now Building on the concept that parents have limited time to access parenting supports and need to be able to access these supports when their children are busy, the idea was put forth to provide a parent “hotline” or a website where parents could connect with a parenting ‘expert’ online. The prototype also considered the idea that parents want to connect with other parents so the idea of ‘expert’ encompassed those parents who have “been there”, have experienced a range of parenting challenges and have come through these challenges successfully.

Parenting Website Many ideas focused around creating a website for parents. Videos, games, research articles, practical tips and strategies, opportunities to engage conversations with other parents as well as opportunities to contribute to the content of the website were all components of the idea. A parenting app was suggested by a number of the youth who participated in one of the labs.

Neighbourhood Nights Building on the ideas that parents want to connect with each other, develop supportive relationships and have learning opportunities that are convenient for them, the idea of neighbourhood nights was developed. This prototype looked at locating parenting conversation groups in neighbourhoods. The purpose was to bring parents together to discuss their parenting concerns on an informal, ‘drop in’ basis. The groups would be facilitated by an experienced parent or a parenting facilitator but parents would learn from each other through the discussions. Coffee and snacks would be part of the invitation and where possible, the idea included holding these conversations at locations where parents were already gathering and where children were otherwise occupied (e.g., at a community centre during sporting events).

Our first step in conceptualizing the prototypes was to generate a “low fidelity” representation of each one. We drew storyboard representations of parents interacting with the prototype, created graphics and wrote sample stories. Two examples are shown below, one depicting a mock up poster for Neighbourhood Nights, and one depicting a story for Facebook.
Testing

We took the “low fi” models of our four prototypes into the community for feedback. We attended a school wellness fair and a local library and invited parents into a conversation about each of the prototypes. We asked them to tell us their reactions, if they would find this form of parenting education useful and if they would use it. We displayed our models in common spaces at our offices and invited staff to comment, both as parents and as service providers. We presented at The Children’s Planning Table and elicited feedback about the prototypes from the audience. We presented at a meeting of the Positive Parenting Community committee and engaged participants in conversation about the prototypes. We also presented to the Lead Agency Advisory Council for Children’s Mental Health Services in Waterloo Region. In all, about 250 people contributed to the project during the testing phase. Generally, we received very positive feedback and
consistent endorsement of our ideas. We were told again and again that these strategies would enhance the parenting education in Waterloo Region.

Based on the feedback, we refined the prototypes into more comprehensive models, developed “medium fidelity” representations of them, and set out, again, to test them. For the Neighbourhood Nights prototype, we created several models of how these could unfold and held three pilot sessions to test the models, one in a local community centre, one with a group of newcomers to Canada and one alongside our Walk In Counselling Clinic. In total, 18 parents attended the pilot sessions. The conversations at each were very lively and participants expressed they would attend more of these sessions, were they available in their communities. We received feedback that the title “neighbourhood nights” was confusing, especially if some of these groups were to be held during day time hours. We tried a different name, “Parent Pop In”, but this name was not popular, either. Eventually, this prototype came to be called “Let’s Talk Parenting” community groups.

We developed three stories and posted them on our KW Counselling Services Facebook page, titling the column “Parents of WR” (to mimic Humans of NY). These stories received some attention but did not generate the conversation we had hoped. We also sent these stories out via Twitter, again to minimal response. While it was difficult to interpret this lack of responding, we concluded that these stories required the proper context in order to generate a meaningful connection with readers.

We also began to develop a parenting website. Initially we called the website Raising Great Kids in Waterloo Region. Our mock up of the website generated positive feedback and helped us narrow in on the components of the site that would most enhance and expand the parenting education resources available in our region. Based on feedback from community members and the development of the website concept, the website was renamed, ParentingNow.ca. The description of the website and the further iterations of the prototypes are described in the next chapter. We embedded the Parent Chat—Now prototype into the website.

From the conversations about the Parent Chat—Now and the Parenting Pop In prototypes, the idea of using experienced parents to facilitate these activities developed into a prototype. Building on the insight that parents want to learn from others who have had experience and are able to guide them through similar challenges, we developed the idea of incorporating experienced parents as facilitators for the community parenting groups as well as the online parenting conversations. We titled this prototype “Experienced Parents”.

### Design Principles

Design principles were developed based on everything we heard from those who contributed during the engagement activities and feedback sessions. Design principles are a tool to “gut-check” whether an idea (prototype) meets the needs of key stakeholders—in our case, parents and caring adults. They are a kind of litmus test for whether or not an idea reflects the key learnings derived from the engagement process. They
are a quick way to test ideas and generate new ideas; they are not ideas in and of themselves. Design principles are intentionally general and can be applied to almost all ideas and solutions that arise through design thinking. They are written from the point of view of the stakeholder—parent—and are intended to reflect our understanding of the experiences they told us. Our seven design principles are briefly summarized below. A detailed description of each principle can be requested.

**DESIGN PRINCIPLES**

1. I want to be the best parent or caring adult I can be.  
   Parents are motivated to do the best they can for their children. Being good at this matters!

2. I want my parenting experience to be understood and valued.  
   Parenting is a delicate balance of distress and distress which can shift in an instant. Being understood matters.

3. I want to connect with and learn from other parents.  
   Parents want to learn from the experiences of others.

4. I want to develop a network of reliable supports.  
   People turn to people they know and trust when they’re faced with a challenge.

5. I want options and the ability to choose what fits for me.  
   There is no one right way to parent—parents know what fits for them.

6. I want information I can trust.  
   Parents can find anything on the internet these days, but how do they decide what to believe?

7. I want learning opportunities to be easy to find, get to and fit with my schedule.  
   Life is busy and sometimes there is only a moment to reach out.

**Prototype Impact Measurement**

As part of the testing phase, we invited a group of parents and community partners to attend a workshop in which we asked participants to evaluate the potential impact of the four prototypes that emerged from the testing and iterating process. The purpose of this workshop was to assess each prototype on three key dimensions, which included:

1. **Potential Impact.** If the idea was successful, would it make a key contribution to deepening impact in the community?
2. **Momentum.** *Does the idea have enough momentum to be carried forward, or can the momentum be generated.*

3. **Organizational Match.** *Is the idea consistent with the strength and goals of KW Counselling Services?*

The four prototypes were rated according to these key dimensions and an overall impact rating was assessed. Each key dimension contained 3 subsections, which are rated on a 7-point scale, where 1 represented a low or poor score and 7 a high or excellent score. Table 6 presents the overall results for each prototype.

**Table 6: Impact Scores/Ratings for Four Prototypes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prototype</th>
<th>Total Score (max. score = 63)</th>
<th>Impact Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ParentingNow.ca</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced Parents</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Pop Ins</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>75.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of WR</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The website (ParentingNow.ca), the community discussion groups (Parent Pop Ins, now called Let’s Talk Parenting) and the Experienced Parents prototypes all received high, positive scores from participants, indicating their potential to have a strong impact in the community, to generate momentum and to fit with the values and goals of KW Counselling Services. The Facebook-based stories (Parents of WR) were not rated as highly and demonstrated only mediocre potential for impact in the community. In looking closely at the specific feedback about this prototype, participants noted that this concept was more likely to provide impact at the individual level than for the community at large. It was recommended that this concept be part of a continuum of service and not a standalone prototype. Moving forward, we decided to incorporate this idea into the ParentingNow.ca website concept (as the website includes a Facebook page).

**Transforming Parenting Education in Waterloo Region: Emergent Model**

At the beginning of this project, we set out to transform the way that we offer parenting education to the citizens of Waterloo Region. *Exploring the Future of Parenting Education* was our first step—a rather giant first step—into the learning experiences of parents and caring adults. We are now on the threshold of our second step as we get ready to launch a new approach to parenting education, *Parenting Now: Today. Tomorrow. Together.* This model is the culmination of our design process, bringing together three prototypes into a comprehensive approach to parenting education. We believe it captures what we heard from the parents and many others that we spoke with: that parenting is about connecting with the moments of today, building for tomorrow and finding our way together—with our children, family, friends and each other. Our vision is for a system of parenting education that provides a seamless experience for parents as they are seeking information, learning, supports, and relationships. We set out to design a model...
of parenting education that is accessible (readily available when and where needed), relevant (content and delivery methods fit with what parents express they need and want) and engaging (content and delivery methods captivate interest and motivate change). We believe we have done this but, as we move forward with our new approach, we need to stay open and curious—did we get it right?

The three prototypes we are bringing forward from our design process are not intended as standalone ideas; rather, they are interrelated activities for enhancing the skills and knowledge of the parents of Waterloo Region. The prototypes, discussed below, are the foundation and key activities of our model.

**ParentingNow.ca**

Serving as the hub for our model, the website is intended to provide the parents and caring adults of Waterloo Region with an engaging, informative and responsive web-based experience that will:

- facilitate connection with other parents, caregivers, and caring adults.
- provide compelling and practical information on parenting topics
- serve as a vehicle for easy access to other parenting resources and supports.

The website has three pillars, which correspond to each of these goals and which have been informed by our Design Principles.

The first pillar is **CONNECT**. Throughout our research, we heard first and foremost that parents learn through connection with other parents. To make connections easy and natural, this section of the website will offer mechanisms for parents to connect with Experienced Parents, read comments, questions and stories from other parents and find out about parenting events taking place in the community. We also hope that parents who meet in-person at events will use our website and/or Facebook page as a vehicle to remain connected.

The second pillar is **LEARN**. Throughout our research, parents stated that they wanted practical information about parenting, that they wanted to see the tips and strategies in action and that they wanted to know how other parents are handling these issues. The objective in this section is to provide compelling and practical information for parents, caregivers and caring adults through articles, videos and animations, a “Research Says” button and a comments section. We will welcome articles, tips, videos, etc. from our community partners as well.

The third pillar is **SUPPORT**. Parents told us that they often want to reach out but do not always know where to go for the support they want. They want information to be easy to access and help
them connect directly with the service they need. The objective of this section of parentingnow.ca is to provide parents with easy access to a range of parenting as well as child-based supports in our region. We would link with a number of community services, including the members of the Positive Parenting Community Committee and The Children’s Planning Table.

**Let’s Talk Parenting**

Let’s Talk Parenting is our second prototype for engaging parents and caring adults in parenting education. Over and over again, we heard from parents that their best learning occurs in conversation with other parents. Our research showed that parents want to be understood and supported in their parenting, that they learn best in connection with other parents and that they want to learn practical approaches from one another. Let’s Talk Parenting will be the hub around which this learning and connection can occur.

*Let’s Talk Parenting on ParentingNow.ca* Website users will be able to connect, in real time, with an experienced parent or a community contributor through our *Let’s Talk Parenting* chat space. The chat space will “pop up” as website users explore the website and the resource person currently online will be identified. Users can then chat with that person, if they wish. The resource person may be an experienced parent (see next prototype) or someone from one of our community partners.

*Let’s Talk Parenting in the Community* We will also hold Let’s Talk Parenting groups in various communities, connecting parents in-person as well as online. Let’s Talk Parenting in the Community will be informal parenting groups designed to bring parents together for conversation, connection and learning. Discussions will be facilitated by experienced parents and parents will be invited to share their parenting stories or strategies with others. The groups, or “meet ups”, will be held throughout the Region—in community or neighbourhood centres, partner agencies, places of worship, schools, etc. They will also be held in communities that are not location-based, but are rather more life-based, for instance among parents whose children have special needs or parents who identify as LGBTQ+. Regardless, they are intended to foster community connection, peer support and meaningful learning.

**Experienced Parents**

Our third prototype is “Experienced Parents”. In our research we heard that parents want to feel heard and understood and know they are not the only one struggling with certain issues, they want to connect with people they trust, who they know have “been there” and learned how to deal with challenges, and they want to learn from the experiences of others. This prototype will allow us to build a group of community-based experienced parents who can provide this kind of support and “expertise” to the parents and caring adults of Waterloo Region.
What is an experienced parent? They are parents who have “been there”, who have experienced both the joys and the challenges of parenting and who are able to share their wisdom and ideas with other parents. They are not “experts” but they will answer questions to the best of their ability and help to connect parents with other resources as necessary. Their goals will be to listen to the experiences of other parents, build relationships with Let’s Talk Parenting website users and community group participants and facilitate connections among participants. Experienced parents will connect with parents, both online and in the community. They will be featured on the Let’s Talk Parenting chat space on ParentingNow.ca and will lead the conversations at the Let’s Talk Parenting community sessions. Their goal will be to connect parents with other parents, build relationships and help people connect to the resources they are seeking.

Figure 6 represents a visual conceptualization of our model.

**Figure 6: Conceptual Model, Parenting Now: Today. Tomorrow. Together.**
CHAPTER SIX: NEXT STEPS

The purpose of this report has been to summarize the design work we began at the beginning of 2015 and completed at the end of 2016. It is also intended to inform the community about our next steps in transforming parenting education in Waterloo Region. With Exploring the Future of Parenting Education, we set out to push the boundaries of typical parenting education. Beginning with a glimmer of possibility for the future of parenting education, and guided by our partners at Overlap, we embarked on this journey of design thinking. The process has been long and intense; we have faced frustrations and setbacks. We have had our assumptions illuminated and challenged. We have developed new skills and forged new partnerships. Ultimately, the process has been packed with learning and insight—about design thinking methodology but, more importantly, about how parents and the others who surround and nurture the children in their lives gain their parenting skills and knowledge. From the outset, we have emphasized the process of learning over the content of learning. This does not mean that what people learn is not important, rather we were most interested in how they learn; an unexpected outcome was also learning about why they learn. Now, at the end of 2016, we are excited for our next steps, Parenting Now: Today. Tomorrow. Together.

As an organization with over five decades of parenting education services to the citizens of Waterloo Region, we are excited about this next phase in the evolution of our parenting education. It both enhances our existing services and adds a range of new opportunities for the parents and caring adults we serve and the community organizations we partner with.

In meeting the educational and support needs of parents, we know that we also serve the children and youth of Waterloo Region. The research is very clear that strengthening the skills of parents and other adults who surround and support children, benefits children. At the Positive Parenting Community Committee, we believe that, “Positive parenting invests in the wellness of parents, therefore investing in the wellbeing of children”. By investing in excellent parenting education, we know that we are investing in the well-being of our children—of any age. Through Parenting Now, we hope that:

- Parents and caring adults will find connection and learning through our website and community activities.
- Parents and caring adults will find resources and learning content they trust.
- Knowledge and practice of positive parenting principles will increase throughout Waterloo Region.
- Parents and caring adults will enhance and grow their parenting skills and knowledge.
- Collaboration among service providers for parenting education will be expanded and deepened.
- Ultimately, the children and youth in Waterloo Region will experience well-being and positive developmental health.

The Lyle S Hallman Foundation continues to be invested in this project and will fund the implementation of *Parenting Now. Today. Tomorrow. Together.* Implementation requires a multi-staged approach, over four years.

**Stage One: Launch** The first year of the project will be getting all components of Parenting Now up and running. This will include formalization of the Experienced Parent prototype, collection of content for parentingnow.ca, pilot testing of the various components of the website and planning for Let’s Talk Parenting community groups. A formal research and evaluation plan will also be developed as part of the launch stage.

**Stage Two: Evaluation** Year Two of the implementation will focus on running the evaluation plan. We will be in full swing with the activities of the three prototypes and will to continue to create new and engaging content, facilitate connections with other organizations, and promote our activities. We expect that as a result of user feedback, we will make changes or upgrades to the website, adjust the way that our Let’s Talk Parenting groups are run or modify how we are engaging our Experienced Parents. By the end of the second year, we will be able to produce a report summarizing the activities, feedback and potential outcomes of the project.

**Stage Three: Sustainability** Year Three will continue the activities of the project, including ongoing operation of the evaluation plan, but the focus of this stage will be on creating a concrete and meaningful sustainability plan. The research report developed by the end of year two will become the foundation of a communication package designed to attract public and corporate funders to this project. A sustainability plan also requires attention to how we engage with our community partners and program participants. Sustainability will only succeed if we continue to listen to the needs and ideas of those we engage most directly with.

**Stage Four: Future Directions** The focus of the fourth year of this project will be on “where do we go from here”. While continuing our core activities, this phase will include implementation of the strategies developed through our Sustainability Plan. Our research/evaluation will provide another full year of learning for us and will help guide what our next steps will be. We will have three years of experience with people engaged in and providing feedback about our three prototypes. Indeed, by the fourth year, these prototypes may already look very differently from how they look now. We do not yet know what these changes will look like, but we do know that they will continue to be grounded in the learning needs and experiences of the parents and caring adults of Waterloo Region. Our commitment to learning from and co-creating with those who are most invested in parenting education will remain strong.
Concluding Remarks

Parenting education is a popular and widely available activity; maintaining content and delivery methods that are fresh, innovative and impactful is a complex challenge in today’s ever expanding digital world. As online trends become increasingly part of our daily lives, we need to not only “keep up” but actually get ahead of the curve and anticipate the needs of parents, now and into the future. As we learned through this project, today’s parents are discerning and even skeptical, as this quote from a parent reflects. With Parenting Now, we are striving to provide parenting education that will be useful, meaningful and trustworthy to the citizens of Waterloo Region. Given how quickly the digital world changes, it seems almost impossible to imagine where we will need to go after four years. As the “internet of things” becomes more and more a part of our daily lives, it is exciting to think about how parenting education can keep up with the future. We are up for the challenge!

“You have to be careful with parenting information, particularly online but books are tricky, too. You just don’t know who to trust. Just because they say they are an expert, doesn’t mean they are.”

Parent Participant
## REFERENCES

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