

**The Comox Valley
Early Years Collaborative**

The Building Connections for Valley Families Project

The North Comox Valley Social Innovation Plan



AUGUST 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, we would like to acknowledge that the work of the Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative and The Building Connections for Valley Families Project has taken place on the unceded territory of the K'ómoks First Nation. It is a privilege and honour to live and work on these traditional lands.

The Building Connections for Valley Families Project represents just a fraction of the valuable work and dedication of the Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative. The **North Comox Valley Innovation Plan** aims to support and contribute to The Collaborative's commitment to positive change for early years' families.

Community collaboration is the foundation of The Connections Project. We would like to recognize the involvement and contribution of participating service agencies, organizations and community leaders. In particular, the wisdom and effort of a very skilled and committed **Steering Committee** has guided the project to where it is today. We would like to thank the current and former members:

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In addition to community organizations and leaders, the participation and expertise of parents has been fundamental. Beyond completing surveys and attending focus groups, there have been a handful of parents who have continued to participate in working groups and provide valuable input and ideas toward The Connections Project's processes and plans.

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I. OVERVIEW

The Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative (The Collaborative) is a network of over 40 individuals and organizations committed to improving the lives of children in the Comox Valley. The Collaborative holds a vision that children’s health and development will steadily improve in the Comox Valley. More specifically, The Collaborative aspires to reduce childhood vulnerability, as measured by the Early Development Instrument, to 25% or lower by the year 2025.

The “25 by 25” target seeks to reduce early childhood vulnerability to 25% or lower by the year 2025.

As an initial step in realizing this vision, The Collaborative commissioned a research report in 2018 (Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative 25 x 25 Project) (Hodge Kwan and Smyth, 2019)). The report recommended the following tangible activities to progress towards the ‘25 by 25’ vision of reducing early childhood vulnerability:

- **Focus initial efforts in North Courtenay**
- **Use a Social Lab Approach**
- **Apply an Indigenous lens**
- **Formalize broader community connections through relationships and data**

To address these recommendations and build on the momentum of the report, The Collaborative launched a research based project called **The Building Connections for Valley Families Project** (The Connections Project) in 2019. The Connections Project aims to build on the strengths within the community, address existing barriers experienced by families, and determine what Comox Valley families need to raise children who thrive.

In 2019, initial funding from Island Health’s Community Wellness Grant was directed to The Connections Project to develop a plan to increase accessibility of formal and informal supports for early years’ families the North Comox Valley (NCV). Further funding was received in 2020 from the Vancouver Foundation (administered by the Comox Valley Community Foundation). This additional funding has enabled The Connections Project to begin developing and implementing two identified social innovations for the North Comox Valley (described in section 3) and to expand the project to the remaining regions of the Comox Valley.

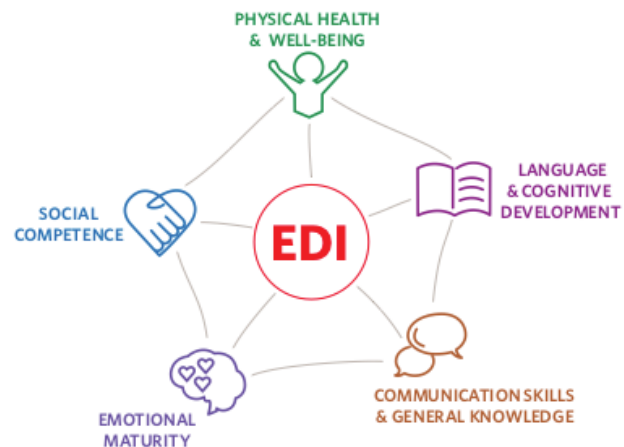
This document summarizes the progress of The Connections Project in the North Comox Valley region from the spring of 2019 to August 2021. It also provides an outline of the three phases of the project, an overview of recommendations, and future actions required to implement the social innovations identified for the North Comox Valley.

1.1 Early Years' Health and Wellbeing & the Early Development Instrument (EDI)

A child's first years are fundamental for lifelong health and development. Early experiences critically impact the developing brain, body, and personality of young children, and these experiences create a foundation for later growth, learning, and wellness. Family environments, peer interaction, literacy and language exposure, socio-economic factors, access to health care and community resources, and early learning activities are just some of the many experiences that affect a child's developmental process.

The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) is a research network that aims to understand and address the fundamental early developmental issues for children (<http://earlylearning.ubc.ca>). Through their research, HELP has developed a comprehensive child development monitoring system (The Early Development Instrument (EDI)) in order to examine how these various experiences and environments influence child development.

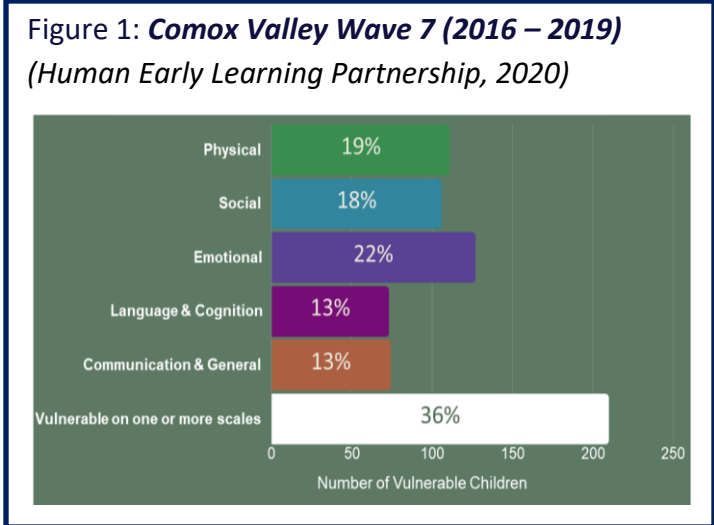
The EDI has been implemented across BC to measure the developmental health of kindergarten children and includes five scales: 1) physical health & wellbeing, 2) social competence, 3) emotional maturity, 4) language & cognitive development, and 5) communication skills & general knowledge. EDI data has been collected in seven "waves" over nearly two decades, allowing researchers, policy-makers, service providers, and parents to identify how child development characteristics are changing across the province. Such valuable information can inform the creation and implementation of early year's services and strategies to support child development in neighbourhoods and communities across BC.



“The quality of early childhood affects the quality of the future population and the prosperity of the society in which these children are raised.” - Dr. Fraser Mustard

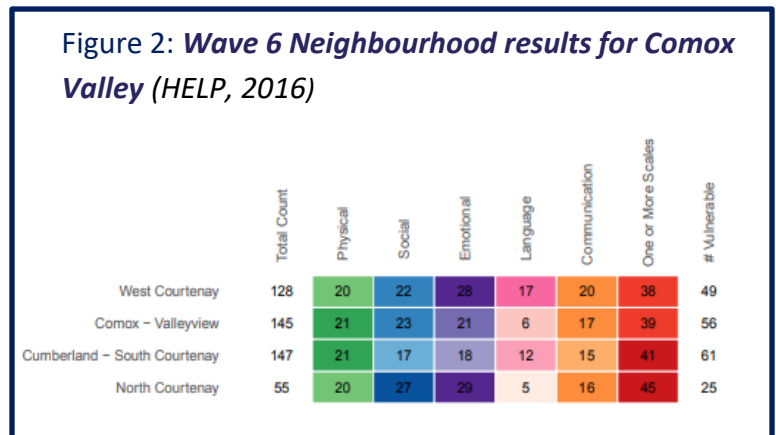
In Wave 7 (2016-2019) of the EDI, the data show that the majority of children in BC (over 67%) are doing very well in terms of early childhood development outcomes when they enter kindergarten

(HELP, 2020). In the Comox Valley, as seen in Figure 1, we see similar trends, in that the majority of children growing up in this community (64%) are meeting or exceeding child development outcomes. However, there is potential to see improvements to the EDI data so that more children in our community experience optimal wellbeing in their earliest and most important years of development. These data provide an opportunity to step back and identify how families with young children are being supported and are accessing resources in the Comox Valley. Likewise, these data indicate that there may be different and better ways for service providers and professionals to connect with families, in order to improve early childhood outcomes.



The Connections Project is organized around four neighbourhoods, or areas, defined by HELP. This allows us to align our findings with subsequent EDI results and to easily access other research data (e.g. socio-economic data and information reflecting childhood experiences) that HELP also gathers for these geographic regions. Please note: North Courtenay has been renamed the North Comox Valley for the purposes of clarity for The Connections Project.

When the Building Connections for Valley Families Project was initiated, North Courtenay (North Comox Valley) indicated the highest EDI vulnerability in Comox Valley (see Figure 2). With the added complications of rural living and being more isolated from the service core of Courtenay and Comox, the North Comox Valley Area was prioritized as a starting point for the Connections Project.



1.2 The Early Years Vision

The Connections Project is founded on the belief that we can work together as a community to increase children’s health in the early years in the Comox Valley. We aim to identify and build on the strengths of this community in how it supports and encourages young children to thrive and develop physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. The Project will also serve to determine additional needs identified by families and the current barriers families experience in accessing resources and support in the community. With this community-based knowledge, we hope to support families with young children in finding play and learning opportunities and in building social connections in their neighborhoods.

I.3 Methodology: A Social Innovation Lab Approach

As per the recommendation of the 25x25 Report, The Connections Project adopted a Social Innovation Lab Approach to address childhood vulnerability in a contextual way.

“Innovation is a mixture of the old and the new with a dash of surprise.” Al Etmanski

According to Westley and Laban (2015), a social innovation is any idea or initiative that challenges and (over time) contributes to changing the routines, resources and governing principles of the broader social system in which it is introduced.

Social Innovation Labs (SIL's) are designed to tackle complex societal challenges (in this case, childhood vulnerability) in ways that shift the system(s) in which the problem arose (Westley et. al, 2015). The defining elements of SIL's are outlined in the infographic below and expanded upon in the following sections.

SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS (SIL'S)



Used to tackle complex societal challenges that requires systems change



Adopts a Community Development Model The process includes diverse stakeholders and users (parents)



Experimental & innovative interventions are prototyped, trialed and reviewed



Utilize a systems thinking approach

Comox Valley SIL's are designed to increase child health and well-being by building on strengths, determining needs and addressing barriers experienced by CV families.

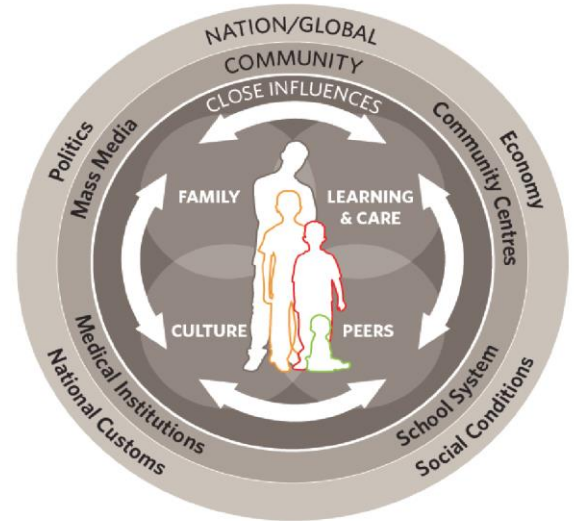
Systems Change & Systems Thinking

An important element of a SIL Approach involves applying a systems thinking approach in addressing the problem of childhood vulnerability. A systems thinking approach challenges our conventional thinking and encourages us to look at social issues with a contextual lens and to consider the multi-layer complexities that influence them. Therefore, understanding what impacts child development firstly requires us to take a step back, look beyond the symptoms, heighten our awareness and consider the context of all of the potential systems that are involved. Family systems, school systems, community systems, political systems, and social systems are just a few of the many systems that contribute to the environment children are raised in and their development.

David Peter Stroh (2015) outlines the defining elements of systems thinking:

- The relationship between problems and their causes is indirect and not obvious
- We unwittingly contribute to the problems and can influence changing them (we are the system)
- Most quick fixes have unintended consequences. They make no difference or can make matters worse in the long run
- In order to optimize the whole we must improve the relationships between the parts

A systems thinking approach is therefore critical in recognizing that sustainable systemic change requires intervention at multiple levels if parents and their children are to receive a deeply anchored web of support. The diagram on the right from HELP (2019, p. 15) demonstrates the complex, multi-layered factors when we look at early childhood development in a systems thinking framework.



While the scale of change offered by systems thinking is significant, the value of seemingly small (and sometimes slow) steps towards relationship building needs to be highlighted. Shifts in the system require plenty of patience, time and energy and effectiveness will depend on establishing these relationships at a foundational level (Kaplan, 2021). Kaplan further emphasizes the importance of building upon neighbourhood strengths as critical to systems change and concludes; “When communities foster leadership from within that can better connect people, they develop the social capital and collective efficacy necessary to address the social problems they wish to tackle” (Kaplan 2021). Thus, creating opportunities to establish and further develop relationships is at the heart of The Connections Project’s ambition.

Understanding a Community Development Model

Utilizing a Community Development model is important to creating social and community change and is a key component of a SIL approach. With a Community Development perspective, community members are considered “experts” in their communities, whose understanding and knowledge of their community equip them with an invaluable ability to discuss, decide, implement, lead and evaluate programs within their neighborhoods (Smart, 2017). Therefore, families are considered a strength within the community, critical assets to systems change, and central to identifying the community’s needs and informing the innovations. As Angela Blanchard outlines, “Community development is about unlocking that asset, releasing people’s potential to move forward together” (2012).

Community development also highly values deep collaboration among multi-disciplinary teams and diverse stakeholders. The Connections Project strives to include participation not only from parents, but by as many members of the child development system as possible. In this way, the change process is inclusive of a wide range of voices and the community is empowered from within. Although organizations and service providers are instrumental support to The Connections Project, they do not drive the agenda in the process of identifying and implementing the potential innovations for each neighbourhood. The focus of this project has been, and will continue to be, to support the users of the system (the families).

Experimental in Nature

The North Comox Valley has become our initial social lab for this project. The SIL approach provides a structured process for approaching (and perhaps even redefining) problems, imagining high potential interventions, and piloting potential solutions in a safe and creative environment. An important element of a 'social lab' is its experimental nature and it is not expected to produce perfectly successful outcomes upon the first attempt. It is a process of testing or prototyping ideas, trialing, evaluating and reviewing the process unique to the particular neighbourhood.

Upon the evaluation and review of the implementation of the innovation, it is important not to just learn and adapt to that particular intervention within a neighbourhood. When you are using a social innovation approach, the intent is to scale activities based on what you are learning. It is important to ensure that the strategies attempted are evaluated for their potential adaptability in other areas. Additionally, it is important to think not only about scaling out (that is, adapting strategies across local neighbourhoods) but also scaling up (that is, integrating solutions across organizational hierarchies to facilitate system wide change).

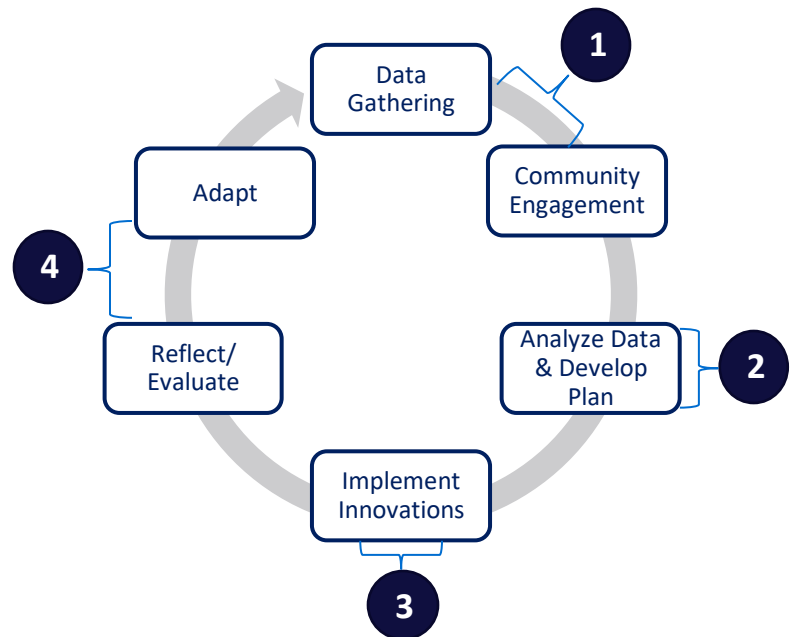
Project Principles

By adopting a social innovation lab approach, The Connections Project assumes a number of underlying principles:

- Children thrive in healthy environments
- Children's development is complex. It is impacted by individual, family, community and broader societal factors
- Parents know what is best for their children
- Parents do the best they can for their children within their context and circumstances
- Parents and community residents are the most effective leaders in local change

Project Phases

All components of The Connections Project will be developed within a continuous cycle of learning and adaptation. Building in the expectation and ability to adapt makes it possible to respond to changing contexts and community needs as they arise. The progression of the cycle is laid out in the diagram to the right.



The Connections Project has progressed through three distinct phases in the North Comox Valley:

- 1) **Research and community engagement.** Working with local citizens and many service providers in the community, we conducted parent surveys and focus groups, inquiring about the experiences of raising young children in the North Comox Valley area.
- 2) **Analysis of data and plan development.** Again, working with residents, researchers, service providers and local leaders, we worked to develop a realistic plan to increase and enhance innovative supports for all families with young children.
- 3) **Development and implementation** of the plan for innovation in the community. We are currently in this stage of the plan, with a pilot project commencing in September 2021.

A fourth phase of evaluation, reflection and adaptation will be implemented once the pilot project is initiated. It is the intention that this subsequent phase of the project will allow us both to study the impact of our initial work and to adapt and scale the initiative in other areas of the community.

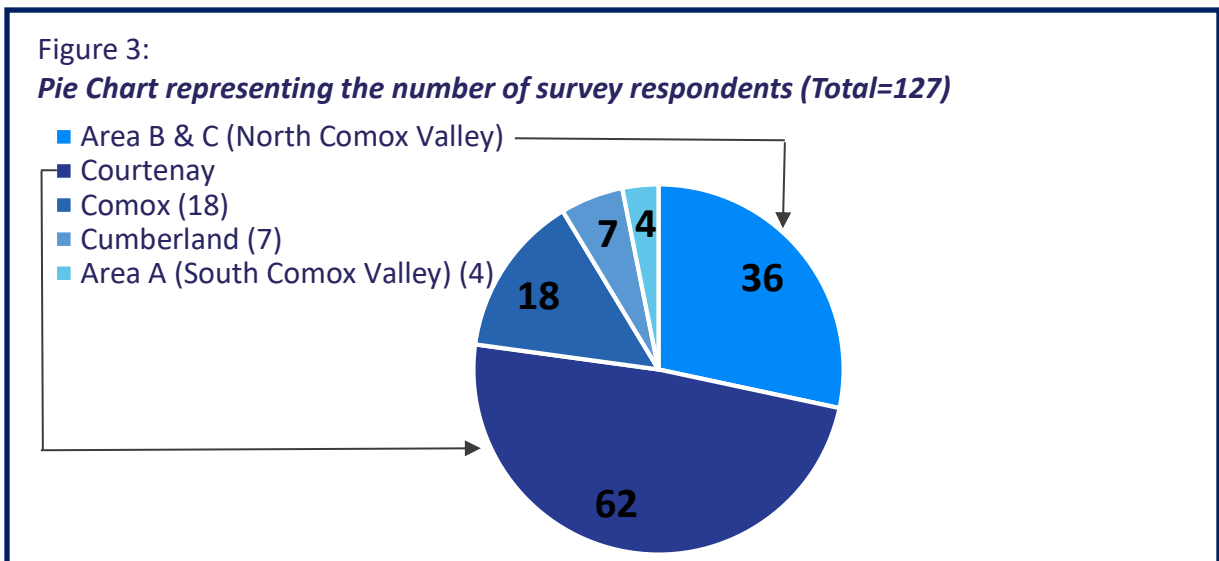
2. Phase I: Research & Community Engagement

Considerable effort has been put towards community engagement and data collection to better learn about the experiences of parents from the North Comox Valley. This process began in the Fall of 2019 and concluded in the January of 2020.



2.1 The Survey

A voluntary on-line survey (30 questions) was conducted in October/November 2019 to collect feedback from parents and families about their experiences raising children in the Comox Valley. Questions for the parents and caregivers revolved around the kinds of activities/resources/supports they access, if they experience any barriers/challenges to accessing these services, and how connected parents feel to others in their community. Additionally, three open-ended questions about strengths/benefits of living in their neighbourhood with regards to raising children were asked. One hundred and twenty seven responses to the survey were received. School District 71 hosted the online survey and supported the creation and distribution of it. The survey was advertised through The Collaborative, social media, SD71 Communications, PAC’s, local radio and newspapers. The geographical breakdown of respondents is represented in Figure 3, below.



Data from the North Comox Valley was evaluated independently of the other regions. Reports

specific to the Rural Areas B & C were completed and evaluated, and a brief summary of parenting experiences is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: A snapshot of early years parenting experiences of NCV parents

Top 2 Challenges accessing parent & child resources	#1 Hours of Operation #2 Distance from home or work	61% 41%
Attend parent/child groups at least 1x/week	North Comox Valley Across all CV areas	21% 39%
What parents value in the Comox Valley (open-ended question)	Access to outdoors/nature Access to playground	85% 56%
Entire Comox Valley	Agree or strongly agree they would like to be more socially connected	78%
Sources for parenting questions & supports	Social media/web Friends & family	53% 71%

2.2 Focus Groups/Conversation Circles

In addition to the surveys, more in depth data was collected through focus groups with parents. Two in person focus groups were conducted during the winter of 2020 at local Elementary Schools. The plans for further focus groups were foiled upon the emergence of COVID-19.

The purposes of the focus groups were to supplement the surveys and gain more descriptive detail about parenting experiences relating to the following three topics:

- **Social Connections** – What are parents’ current experiences and ideas for improvement?
- **Early Childhood Development** – What capabilities and ideas do parents have to better support social/emotional development?
- **Improving Early Childhood Well-being** – What do parents identify as their ideal supports and greatest challenges?

The results of the focus groups were compiled and represented in data maps (See Appendix 7.1).

2.3 Service Provider Engagement Session

In January of 2020, a service provider engagement session was conducted. Several participants from a wide variety of service agencies of the Comox Valley came together to share their experiences in working with families in the North Comox Valley Region. Service providers discussed issues pertaining to the following themes:

- **Experiences Reaching Families** – what are the difficulties reaching families and barriers experienced by families to accessing supports
- **Engagement** – how to improve supports and what is working

- **Social/Emotional Development** – what service providers observed in their work with families and suggestions/ideas to support childrens’ social and emotional development
- **Building Connections Between Families** – idea sharing about how families can better connect

These results were recorded and also added to the data maps (**Refer to Appendix 7.1**).

2.4 Data Maps

Results from the focus groups and service provider session were compiled to create the data maps (**see Appendix 7.1**). These data maps illustrate this project’s consideration provide of a wide range of elements in the community system. They are meant to be open-ended in imagining and including innovative ideas that could challenge and/or change the current system.

3. Phase 2: Data Analysis & Plan Development

Analysis of the data was supported by the team at the Human Early Learning Partnership, allowing it to be considered within the province wide context of children’s development. The data was carefully analyzed and evaluated by The Connections Project team. The results of this analysis generated several key themes which were pivotal in developing innovation ideas and guiding the next phases of the project.

3.1 Understanding the North Comox Valley

The North Comox Valley

The geographical region of the North Comox Valley was defined by the HELP project (see Figure 4). It is geographically defined as the three catchment areas for Airport, Huband Park and Miracle Beach Elementary Schools. Note that this extends west to Dove Creek and to Forbidden Plateau.

Notable Characteristics of the North Comox Valley

- Very large geographical area which is mostly rural
- North Courtenay had the highest level of vulnerability (Wave 6 EDI results)
- Neighbourhoods are mostly far apart and services are far away
- Transportation is a big challenge. A vehicle is most often required as bus services are limited
- Some areas very are isolated/difficult and timely to access
- There are several community halls and potential meeting places in the region but not in all neighbourhoods and several see limited use
- A very wide range of socio-economic status exists –
 - increases of financially vulnerable families moving to the northern rural areas
 - transient families due to seasonal work, etc.
 - Some families are living in poverty and housing and food security are big challenges
- The Military Base is in the region along with many military families. The Military Resource Family Centre offers programs and supports to military families

Figure 4: **Map of the Comox Valley’s EDI results** (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2016)



Figure 5: *NCV Demographics* (Hodge Kwan and Smyth, 2019)

North Courtenay demographic snapshot:

- Total population: 12,765
- Number of families: 4,145
- Aboriginal population: 505
- 0-5 population: 576
- Lone-parent families: 340
- Median family income: \$86,311
- Total number of low-income children under 6 years old: 55
- 82% homeowners, 18% renters

- The region has abundant outdoor/nature opportunities and facilities
- Past program participation numbers have been low in some of the programs
- Staffing has at times been a challenge to maintain a consistent facilitator for programs, in part due to low wages and few hours

To better understand what currently exists for early years families in the North Comox Valley, an inventory of programs and activities was conducted in February 2021.

See Appendix 7.2

3.2 Innovation Workshops

Once the data maps were created, the data was evaluated further and informed the agenda for two innovation workshops. The workshops were attended by a variety of NCV parent council members, service providers, community leaders and key stakeholders. The sessions were hosted virtually due to the pandemic. NCV parent council members who were unable to attend provided additional input and feedback on the innovation ideas discussed.

3.2.1 Seeing the System & Identifying Themes

The first workshop was designed to encourage participants to take a broader look at the system and its intended and unintended impacts. Social innovation concepts were reviewed and the data was shared and further evaluated. Participants concluded that:

- The current system is largely organized around centralized services and site-based programming, which can contribute to inaccessibility and creates challenges in connecting with families in rural areas.
- The professionalization of current supports and services means these services are “expert-driven,” which can be less welcoming for some families; this also creates challenges around building relationships and supporting the unique strengths of each family.
- The current system largely benefits those parents and families who a) have the resources (including education, financial, transportation, time) to seek supports; b) are comfortable with professionals and the expert-model, and/or c) are well-connected in the community and have access to reliable transportation to reach the city-centre.

- The current system is largely disadvantageous to those parents and families who a) have fewer resources (including education, financial, transportation, time) to seek supports; b) feel uncomfortable with/intimidated by large groups and/or an expert-model of services; c) are new to the community or have fewer connections; and/or d) have difficulty reaching the city-centre (due to reliable transportation, family schedules, time).

Once a more thorough understanding of the system was established, the participants further explored the data and identified the critical themes that the North Comox Valley innovations should encompass. **The four themes identified at the workshop are outlined to the right.**



Informal & Formal Support Considerations

An important understanding that was further developed at the workshop was the distinction between the need for informal and formal supports. Acknowledging that both formal and informal systems needed to be recognized, as well as the factors that impact these systems (socioeconomic and geographical), was foundational before innovations could be discussed in collective conversations. Some of the ideas shared regarding these informal and formal supports are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2: *Informal and Formal Support Needs of Families in the North Comox Valley Area*

INFORMAL SUPPORTS	FORMAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to connect with and socialize with other parents/families from their area • Parents enjoy nature with family walks or playground play and want more opportunities to do that with other families • Enjoy gathering spaces for community groups/activities • Parent specific activities and social opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education opportunities, workshops and resources addressing child development, learning and skill development, parenting education, mental health supports • Centralized location for service providers and health services to be offered to rural families • Community based drop-in programs, play groups, open gyms, StrongStart, outdoor based groups, events, rotating early years groups

3.2.2 Proposing Social Innovations

Several innovations were proposed at the second workshop. The following ideas were proposed:

1. Engage in the **Active Transportation Project** w/ the CVRD (completed Spring 2021)
2. **Increase accessibility and create online resources** to encourage more engagement with families
3. **Community & resource mapping** in the North Comox Valley
4. Build upon new and existing **community partnerships**
5. Enhance the number of **Community Schools** in the area & and make use of community spaces/schools
6. **Create Rural Community Hubs**
7. **Create a Family Connection Coordinator Position**



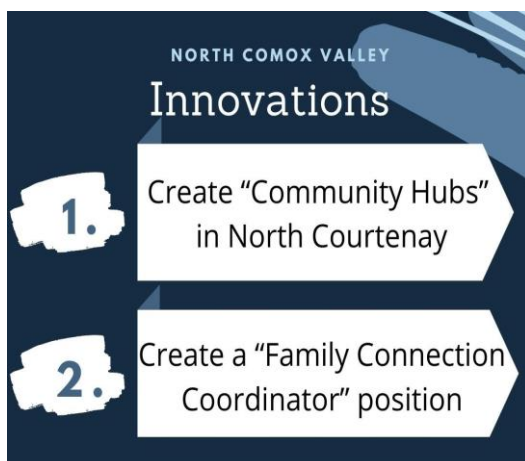
Participants then conducted an exercise to take an in depth look at the desirability, feasibility and viability of each proposed idea.

Other ideas not currently pursued by the Connections Project but worth mentioning are:

- **Intergenerational or Parent Mentorship opportunities** where parents can draw on the experiential knowledge and support of fellow community
- Expanding and delivering more **outdoor programs** - a modality that showed to be especially important during COVID-19
- **Smaller/more frequent community events**
- **Free and/or affordable programs**

Selection of the Top Two Innovations

In the spirit of social innovation and proto-typing ways to change the current system, and with additional consultation with The Connections Steering Committee, two social innovations were selected. The innovations are outlined in the infographic below.



The overarching aim of these two innovations is to improve the current early years' system by:

- 1) Better connecting with families in rural locations
- 2) Offering a skilled presence focused on welcoming and involving local families to participate in hub activities
- 3) Connecting families to one another and to supports and services as needed

3.3 North Comox Valley Parent Council

Parent participation and involvement has been, and continues to be, key to The Connections Project. Following the distribution of surveys and focus groups, a North Comox Valley Parent Council was established. A handful of parent volunteers continued to inform the direction and delivery of the project. Parents from the council continue to provide input and feedback to the development of the innovations. This parent leadership is a foundation to the value and the future success of the hubs.

“I’m so amazed at how this project is progressing and all the possibilities. I look forward to what is next!” *NCV Parent responding to Innovations*

As the hubs develop, a primary goal is to continue to engage parents to drive forward the purpose and activities of the hubs. The Family Connection Coordinator will support the ongoing engagement of parents in the planning and leadership of hub activities. Although a Parent Council was originally proposed for the project, it is recommended that the Family Connection Coordinator explore other ways to engage parents if the Parent Council is not effective. Early experiences engaging with parents indicate that they are interested in supporting the project but involvement on a bigger scale must fit into their busy lives. The Parent Council presents as being somewhat formal and parents have proven to be generous with their time and interest. However, providing less structured input via email feedback or engaging in one on one phone conversations that better fit into their schedules seems preferable to parents. Parent Councils also may have limitations in representing the wider range of parent voices that this project is hoping to seek. Part of the formation of the hubs will be eliciting the needs and want of local parents in a way that is both effective and inclusive. The Coordinator will engage parents at each hub to honour the unique needs and wants of parents from the varying areas and encourage parents to take leadership roles.

4. Phase 3: Innovation Development

4.1 North Comox Valley Innovation Working Groups

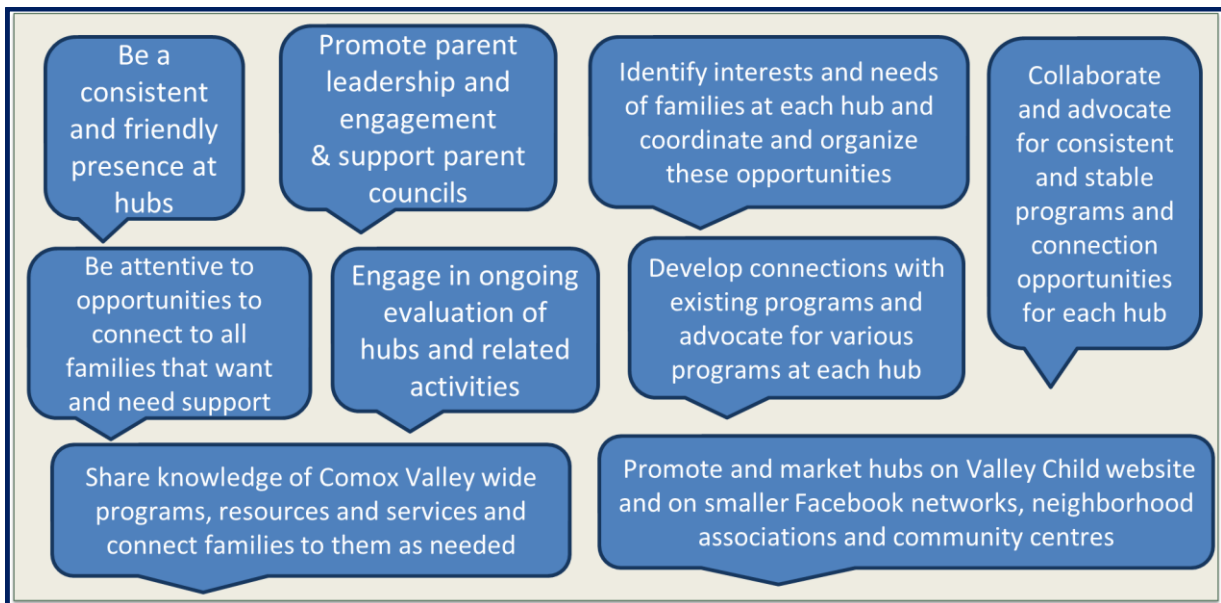
In the spring of 2021, two community working group sessions took place to establish the next steps to develop and implement the two innovations. The first session identified key potential partners, important first steps, challenges and potential funding sources. The second session explored hub locations possibilities, defined the role of the coordinator, identified priorities and discussed measurements of success. This work informed the next steps forward with the first priority being to find the means to hire a Family Connection Coordinator to help drive forward the identified actions.

4.2 Develop a Family Connection Coordinator Position

The Family Connection Coordinator will bring their strong relationship building skills to the community to welcome, invite, and involve local families. They will provide guidance and knowledge regarding supports and services in each of the 3 community hub sites, and be a consistent, welcoming face at the hubs.

4.2.1 Foundations of the Coordinator Role

The NCV working group proposed the roles and responsibilities of the Family Connection Coordinator. These decisions were driven by foundations of the SIL community development approach to best meet the needs of the NCV neighborhoods. The Family Connection Coordinator’s role will be continually dynamic and shifting, based on the changing needs and voices of the NCV’s families and the nature of prototyping this as a social innovation. The key responsibilities of the Coordinator are highlighted below.



4.3 Developing Rural Community Hubs

The Connections Project aims to develop hubs within each of the three different school catchment areas of the North Comox Valley. The sustainability of the hubs will be dependent on building strong partnerships with community groups, service agencies and relevant organizations. Hubs will employ a variety of informal and formal opportunities for families to increase their community connections. The scope of the hubs and opportunities offered will reflect the needs and wants of the parents for each hub area and be contingent on what funding is secured.

4.3.1 Vision and Definition of a Community Hub

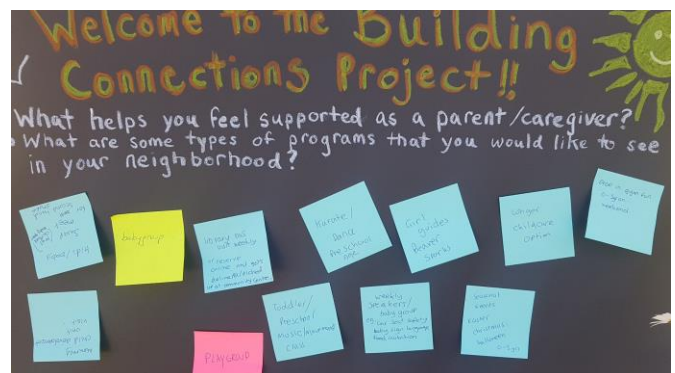
A NCV hub will offer a central space for families to connect with service providers, organizations, and each other in the areas where they live. A hub will foster positive change in the community by removing some of the obstacles families face in accessing support and in offering a consistently available space in the community, for the community.

Community hubs provide a central access point for connection and gathering for families with young children. They provide opportunities for children to develop social and various other developmental skills while building informal support networks for parents. They also inform and connect parents to services and supports available, thereby acting as a touchpoint to reach families before children reach school age. As summarized in Ontario's Community Hub Framework (2015), "no community hub is like another, as each brings together a variety of different services, programs and/or social and cultural activities to reflect local community needs".

4.3.2 Guiding Principles for Developing the Hubs

➤ **Hubs use a community development model:**

- Members of the NCV parent council inform and shape the Project throughout
- Parents of corresponding neighbourhoods will continue to drive the components of individual hubs and will therefore have greater and more simplified access to the resources that they need
- Hubs are responsive to the needs of the particular neighborhoods



➤ **Hubs are inclusive, welcoming and accessible:**

- Efforts will be made to connect with hard-to-reach families
- The environment of the hubs will be welcoming, informal, and supportive. Referrals will not be necessary and the atmosphere will not expert-driven or intimidating

- Parents, with support from the coordinator, will decide how informal and formal support opportunities are delivered
- An Indigenous lens will continue to be sought out and applied for implementation
- Hubs address accessibility challenges: transportation/access was considered in planning. Hub locations need to be as accessible as possible and preferably on public transportation routes. The project will explore partnerships with other organizations that may have the capacity to offer transportation options to families
- Consideration will be given for the need of an online presence as a resource for parents
- **Hubs create consistency and trust in services:**
 - A regular coordinator or dedicated position is required to build relationships with families and to encourage parent input
 - A coordinator can advocate for consistent programming and facilitation, predictability of services and a safety net for families who might otherwise fall through the cracks.
 - Hubs will provide opportunities for touch points to increase the likelihood of families accessing resources before children are school age
- **Hubs will offer long term vision and planning:**
 - A focus on creating a more supportive structure for families in the early years such that patterns of vulnerability can be reduced
 - Evaluation of hubs will happen annually and recommendations for change will be considered
 - The possibility of the need for a mobile hub model will be considered
- **Hubs operate with proximity in mind:**
 - Provides social opportunities for both parents and children to develop relationships by creating opportunities for parents to network in their own neighbourhoods
- **Hub planning relies on organizational partnerships and collaboration:**
 - Brings together community resources to support families and improve access, consistency, and reliability of programs and services
 - Develops and fosters partnerships with other service agencies
 - Hubs serve as a bridge for families to connect with and access other programs and services as needed
 - Considers modifications for COVID-19 (hubs can run programming indoor or outdoor)



4.4 Building Community Partnerships

The success of the innovations are dependent on the support and partnerships within the community. The Connections Project strives to effectively engage and provide project updates to existing community partners while seeking opportunities to develop partnerships with other organizations. In addition to ongoing communications, presentations have been made to the School Board, CVRD Board, various service organizations, school PAC's and other community groups. The diverse and strong participation from the community demonstrates the support and investment the community has in the project. This support also reflects the value that the community places in the health and wellbeing of its children and families.

For more involved partnerships, establishing formal agreements is advised. Project updates will continue to be presented to the Early Year's Collaborative and the Family Connection Coordinator will continue to expand and strengthen community partnerships to achieve the vision of the hubs.

See Appendix 7.3 for a list of current community partners

5. Early Implementation of Innovations

5.1 Guiding Principles for Innovation Development

Establishing the innovations for The Connections Project relied on several guiding principles that have been identified throughout the process of this project. These principles will ensure this project maintains its focus on the community while also addressing childhood vulnerability.

1. **Foster strong parent engagement and leadership to shape the hubs**
2. **Collaborate and partner with key stakeholders and community agencies**
3. **Build upon existing strengths in the Community**
4. **Be attentive to cultural & socio-economic diversity**
5. **Support informal neighbourhood connections between families**
6. **Continue to apply a S-I-L approach**
7. **Support families to reconnect post Covid-19**



5.2 The Selection of Community Hubs

An in depth evaluation of several hub options in each school catchment area was completed. Addressing transportation challenges to access the proposed hubs was difficult to achieve, but as much as possible, hubs were chosen in areas where families already gather, are accessible by public transit or could access with minimal challenges. The recommended hubs are:

- **Miracle Beach Catchment** – Black Creek Community Centre
- **Huband School Catchment** – Huband Park School and/or Dove Creek Hall
- **Airport School Catchment** – Airport Elementary (with additional support and partnership with the Military Family Resource Centre)

However, limitations were encountered to space availability at certain sites and long-term stability of some options were deemed unlikely. For instance, school enrolment numbers fluctuate and empty classroom space that is available one year, may not be available the following years. Therefore, Airport Elementary is on hold as a location and alternatives will be reviewed. The hub locations are dependent on strong relationships with the partnering organization, which must, at a minimum, have availability to host hub activities at least once a week. It is recommended that these hub locations are trialed and re-evaluated on an ongoing basis.

5.3 Parent Outreach and Connections Project Promotion

To support the ongoing role of the Connections Coordinator, and to further develop the innovations, the Healthy Families Program of the Comox Valley Family Services Association provided funding to hire a part-time person to start the early stages of the Family Connection

Coordinator (FCC) position for 6 months.

One of the primary goals of the early work of the Family Connection Coordinator was to connect with more parents in the North Comox Valley neighborhoods and promote The Connections Project Innovations. The FCC reached out to the school PACs, attended three welcome to Kindergarten events, and launched a Building Connections Facebook page. Initial efforts were made in branding and marketing the **Building Connections for North Comox Valley Families Initiative**. In addition, the FCC supported The Connections Coordinator in the further development and implementation of the innovation planning.

Pop-Up Events

As a result of the COVID 19 pandemic and waning participation in the Parent Council, the Family Connection Coordinator delivered a Pop-Up series as an important step to connect with families and continue the development of the innovations. The purpose of the Pop-Ups were to:

1. **Trial the various proposed hub locations**
2. **Provide parents and children with an opportunity to participate in a family program as very few opportunities had been available for quite some time due to the pandemic**
3. **To start the conversations with parents about their needs and wants for supports and connection in each area**
4. **To promote the Building Connections Project and proposed plans for the community hubs**

The Pop-Ups were hosted in June 2021 at Airport Elementary, the Dove Creek Hall and the Black Creek Community Centre. They were all notably well attended and very well received by the families. For some young children, it was their first opportunity to meet, and play with children outside of their family unit. Input from parents was gathered and a contact list of participants was collected and will serve as an effective communication tool moving forward.

The Pop-Ups also demonstrated strong community support for the proposed innovations and involved much collaboration. Donations of space, equipment, funding, promotion, and in-kind hours were provided. Many of these partnerships will expand and serve to be the foundation of the implementation of the innovations moving forward.



June Pop Up Play Series

**Monday, June 7th @
Airport Elementary - 9-11am**

**Wednesday, June 16th @
Black Creek Community Centre
9am-Noon**

**Wednesday, June 23rd @
Dove Creek Hall - 9am-Noon**

Drop in for safe outdoor play and fun activities for children 0-6

Hosted by:
The Building Connections Project
FB: Building Connections for North Comox Valley Families
comoxvalley.connections@gmail.com

Logos: Comox Valley Community Foundation, island health, ccrr, Comox Valley Family Services, Comox Valley Schools, Comox Valley Regional District

109 people (parents/caregivers and children) in total attended the Pop-Up series.

5.4 The Pilot Project

Beginning in September 2021, The Connections Project will begin a Pilot Project for the next phase of the implementation of the rural hubs. The Pilot will have 2 components – 1) the PlanH partnership program and, 2) the Black Creek Community Association partnership program. The Family Connection Coordinator will support these programs and fulfill the roles and responsibilities outlined previously. Due to surplus funding from The Connections Project as a result of Covid19, there is funding to extend the FCC contract to March 2022.

The first component of the Pilot Project involves a partnership with the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD). The Connections Project and the CVRD Recreation Department submitted an application to the PlanH Healthy Community Grant with the purpose of bringing programming opportunities to the hubs. The \$5000 grant was received and will fund weekly parent and child drop-in programs at two hub locations in the North Comox Valley from September 2021 to June 2022.



The program has been named the PLEC (Play, Learn, Experience & Connect) Program and will be primarily coordinated and facilitated by CVRD staff. The PLEC program will serve to trial the implementation of the early years' rural hub model and serve as a platform for the FCC to meet rural families. The FCC will attend and support the PLEC program and focus on building relationships and connections with the attending families. The FCC will also work closely with existing programs and agencies to connect families to them as needed and to coordinate short, informational sessions by relevant service providers as desired by parents.

The second component of the Pilot Project involves a partnership with the Black Creek Community Association. The FCC will attend the Parent & Peanut Program to establish relationships with Black Creek families. The FCC will seek input from families and identify opportunities to improve supports for local families. Encouraging parent leadership and ensuring a community development model will be the foundation of the work of the FCC.

As the FCC establishes relationships with parents at these programs, they will also develop and strengthen relationships with service providers and organizations. The FCC will advocate for better supports and services for rural families and communicate the needs and desires of rural families to relevant organizations and service providers. The FCC will support and potentially coordinate the delivery of more programming, resources and supports at the rural hubs.

6. The Next Steps & Future Vision

The North Comox Valley Innovations have the potential to grow and develop over time. As the foundation of the innovations are based on parent input and needs, these recommendations are subject to change to reflect parent voices and experiences. Thus, the recommendations are intended as a starting point to be regularly reviewed and adapted.

6.1 Recommendations & Actions (Short Term – 0-1 years)

- 1) **Hire a Family Connection Coordinator** with the carried over/surplus Connections Project funding and finalize the job description
- 2) **Develop the following hub locations:**
 - Huband Park Elementary
 - Dove Creek Community Hall
 - Black Creek Community Centre
- 3) **Implement Two Pilot Programs to deliver North Comox Valley Hub Innovations:**
 - Utilize the PlanH funding (PLEC Program) and our strong partnership with the CVRD to support program at Huband Park & Dove Creek Hall.
 - Support an expanded Parent & Peanut Program at the Black Creek Community Association (BCCA)
- 4) **Write a BC Gaming Grant in partnership with Healthy Families/CVSA** to secure ongoing funding for a Family Connection Coordinator and to further hub development
- 5) **Be supportive and open to developing a Hub in the Airport School Catchment**
 - Develop a partnership with the Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) to support families and the MFRC mandate to integrate Military families more into the community
 - Be attentive to and assess future hub possibilities in the catchment area, for example, at Airport School or a mobile hub option
- 6) **Continue to establish and build partnerships with service organizations to improve connections between services and rural families**
 - Collaborate with community partners to coordinate new opportunities for families to access programs resources and supports at the hubs
 - Create partnership or formal agreements as needed
 - Maintain communication with the Early Years Collaborative
 - Provide project updates to CVRD elected officials (Area B & C)
- 7) **Secure additional funding** to extend and expand the role of Coordinator and Hubs
- 8) **Nurture parent engagement opportunities:**
 - Engage families who attended the June 2021 Pop Up events to promote Fall programming and to learn more about parent needs and interests



- Encourage parents and caregivers to take leadership roles and/or inform future hub opportunities and activities
- 9) **Create a marketing and communications plan** in a collaborative effort
 - 10) **Establish a stronger connection with Indigenous service providers and apply an Indigenous lens to programming**
 - 11) **Create a 4-5 year budget plan** for a best case scenario/long term innovation plan
 - 12) **Monitor, evaluate and measure successes** based on pilot activities, parent engagement, suitability of the hub locations, and the impact of the Family Connection Coordinator
 - 13) **Identify actions and make recommendations** incorporating parent input to identify which hubs to pursue/maintain a presence at and how to best meet the needs and wants of parents at these hubs
 - 14) **Have the Building Connection Project Coordinator and Steering Committee members available to support the Family Connection Coordinator as needed**

(Longer Term – 2-5 years)

- 1) **Evaluate the role of the Steering Committee and determine if it will continue to advise the North Comox Valley Innovations** or determine if an independent committee or new positions needs to be established for these purposes
- 2) **Evaluate and adapt the Family Connection Coordinator Role** as needed
- 3) **Explore options to adopt The Connections Project as a program within an existing service agency.** Potentially hire a Program Manager to support the role of the Family Connection Coordinator and oversee all of the innovation plans of the expansion project
- 4) **Support partnerships and advocate for increasing the quantity of hub opportunities to meet needs and wants of the neighbourhoods**
- 5) **Consider implementing a mobile hub to better reach families with transportation challenges or other barriers**
- 6) **Explore partnerships and opportunities to better offer outreach services to rural families**
- 7) **Be attentive to the Building Connections Innovations for the rural areas of the South Comox Valley and consider opportunities to collaborate and to scale up and out**
- 8) **Quantify any changes to the EDI data in the North Comox Valley, in particular the data for 2025**
- 9) **Annually monitor, evaluate, measure successes and make recommendations** based on Hub developments and the role of the Family Connection Coordinator
- 10) **Continue to advocate for, and work towards increased, and more consistent supports for rural early years' families**
- 11) **Continue to report to the Early Years Collaborative and explore opportunities to nurture, support and expand upon partnership opportunities**



6.2 Evaluating & Measuring Success

Executing a Social Innovation Lab approach means that there are no “right” avenues to addressing the problem of childhood vulnerability, nor are there “right” solutions (Camillus, 2008). Evaluation of The Connection Project’s success will be reliant on both qualitative and quantitative measures, with the expectation that new ideas and innovations may surface throughout this process.

Quantitative Measures (Attendance and EDI)

Attendance at the pilot program activities will serve as a valuable quantitative measure. For the new PLEC program, attendance uptake can take time and a good indicator of success can be measured in the progression of attendance over the 10 months of the program. Parent and Peanut, on the other hand, has been an ongoing program at the Black Creek Community Centre. As such, comparing historic parent/child attendance numbers to the expanded Parent and Peanut Program can shed light on the community reception of the program.

Reduction of the neighborhood EDI vulnerability trends over the longer term (Wave 9), is an another (albeit longer-term) performance indicator this project can lean on. Although childhood vulnerability has multiple, complex factors, monitoring EDI over time will provide this project with a neighborhood specific benchmark of children’s health and well-being and a more detailed focus on what aspects of development are in need of extra support. Continued partnership between The Connections Project and HELP will support this evaluation as we move forward and strive to reach ‘25x25’.

Qualitative Measures

Qualitative measures of success will come from parents’/caregivers’ lived experiences of the programs and any reported changes in how they are accessing supports and building connections in their communities. One of the roles of the Family Connection Coordinator will be to casually engage with and listen to how families are receiving the program and how their children are responding to the experiences the program is offering. Drawing out common themes from this input will serve as a valuable way to assess how involved parents feel with the program and to what degree they are finding the program to be supportive to their family’s needs. At the halfway and final mark of the program, the Family Connection Coordinator will distribute a questionnaire to elicit anonymous feedback and also engage with parents who would like to offer more thorough feedback (in the form of one-on-one or group interviews) to inform the Project’s next steps. Honorariums will be provided to those parents who are willing and able to participate in these more time-intensive interviews.



Other Measures of Success

As these pilot programs explore new ways of connecting with parents, it will be important to have the unique needs and wants of parents well documented for each hub. Similarly, partnering with parents in a way that positions them as leaders in this project's ongoing innovations and directions, will be a potential indicator of success.

An important point to note is that some "indicators" of this Project's success will be those that are not typically measurable in the short term and may manifest themselves as an absence of symptoms at a community level. Improving neighborhood relationship with fellow families, increasing a sense of community belonging and connectedness, and preventing isolation (even in just a few individuals) are difficult to measure but are the essence of The Project's vision. Therefore, it will be important to rely on the consistent presence of the FCC to listen for these "success" stories (or alternatively, the "needs improvement" stories).

Another difficult aspect to encapsulate in evaluation data is the potential shift in how the community responds to the needs of its members. For instance, the work that Brenda Poon has done on community systems and the early years points towards several key best practices that can be pivotal in reducing health inequalities in children--a shared vision, a commitment to creating community capacity, and an ability to foster multi-sectoral communication (Hodge Kwan et al., 2019). Therefore, in addition to measurable outcomes on a typical "service-user" level, the evaluation lens might also benefit from being turned towards how community service providers are shifting to thinking about their work in a greater systems context. Therefore, interviews with service providers might also shed light on these potential shifts.



Involving Stakeholders and Incorporating Parent Voices

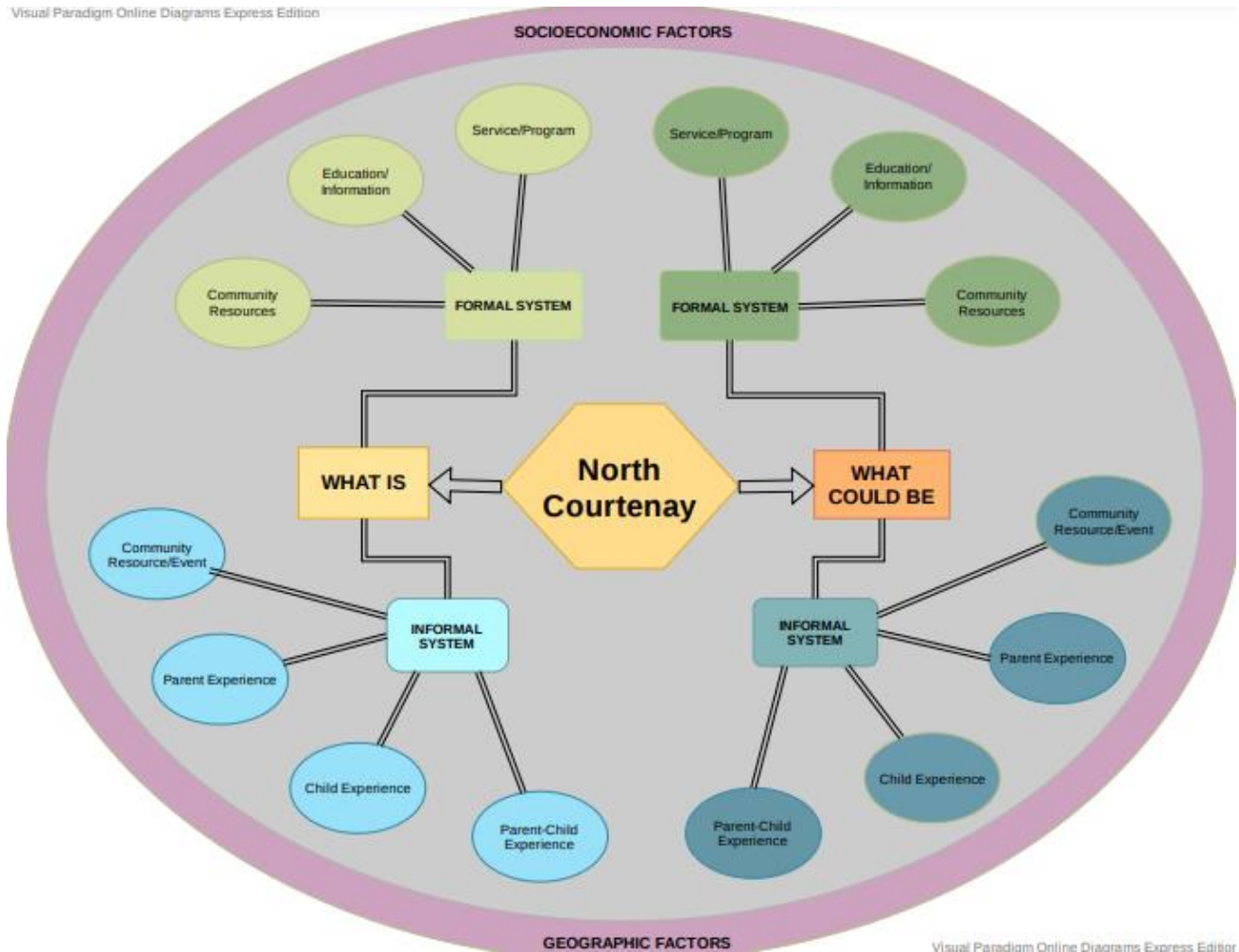
A key component of the upcoming pilot activities will be the opportunity to involve service providers in a way that is responsive to the voices of local parents and that extends beyond the constraints of the current model (for example, the majority of services are currently centralized and require parents to seek out/make appointments for what they need). Fleshing out and addressing current challenges and barriers to early years resources, as well as creating alternative contact points with service providers will be important to document in order to

understand if the innovations are creating something that is both new and supportive for the neighborhoods of the North Comox Valley. The Family Connections Coordinator will have ongoing conversations with both service providers and parents to help gain understanding about how this approach is being experienced from both a service user and a service provider perspective.

7. Appendices

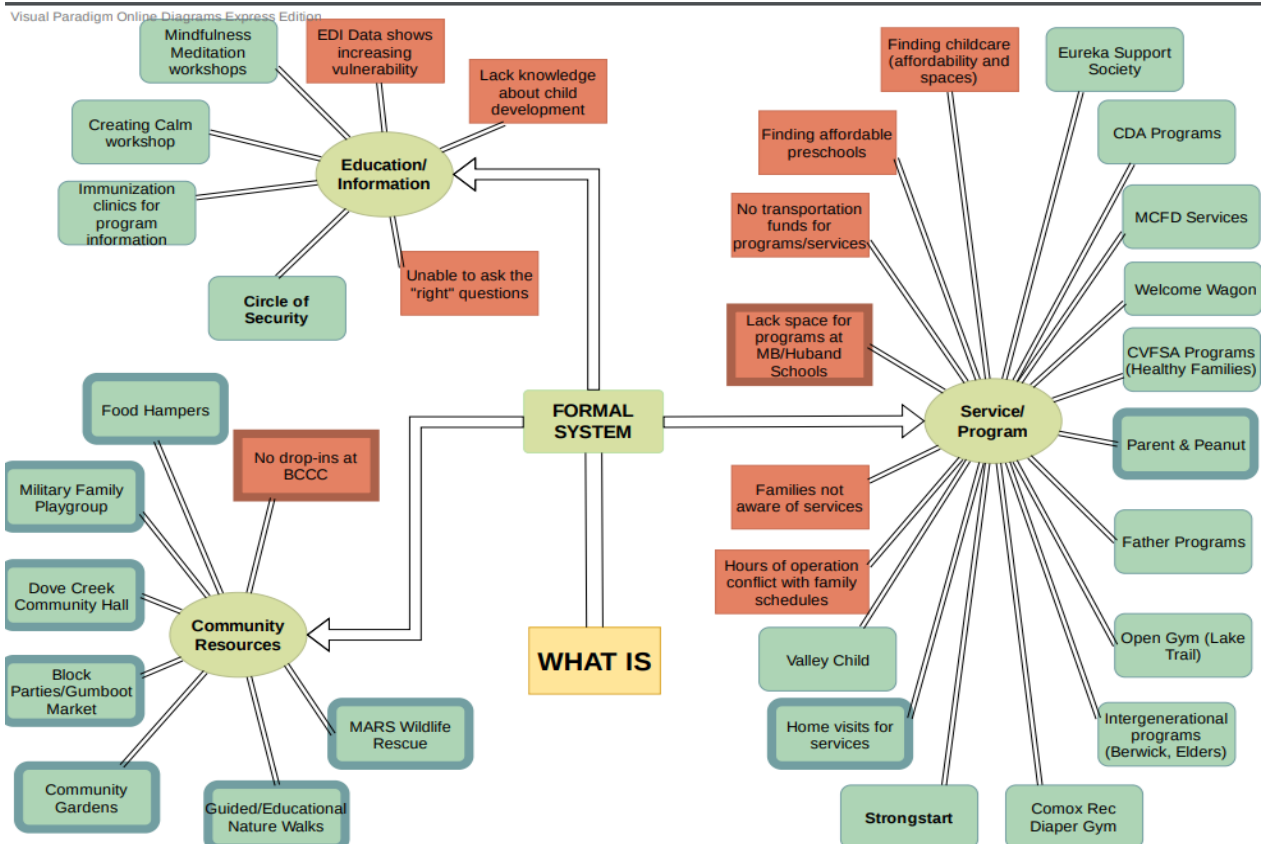
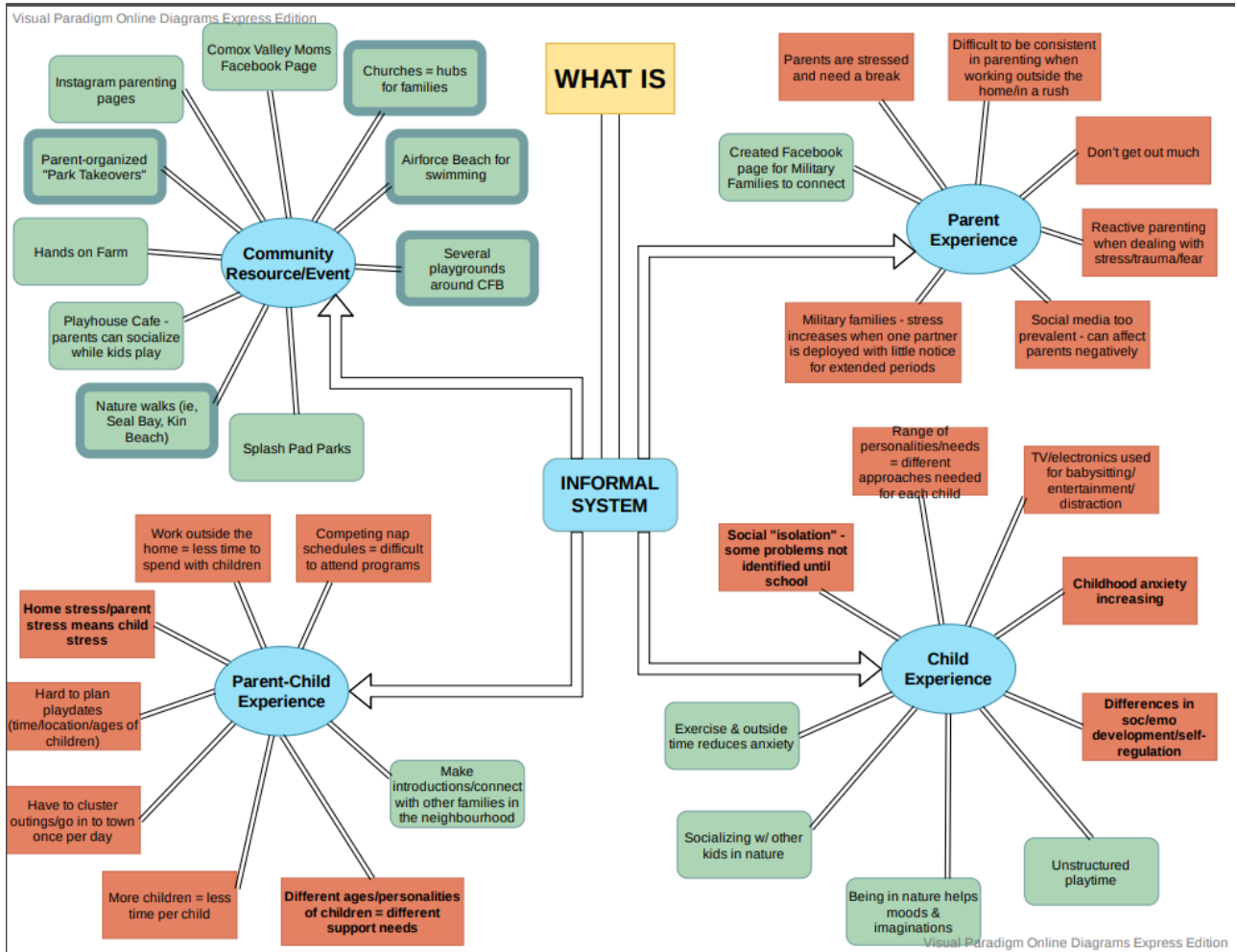
7.1 DATA MAPS

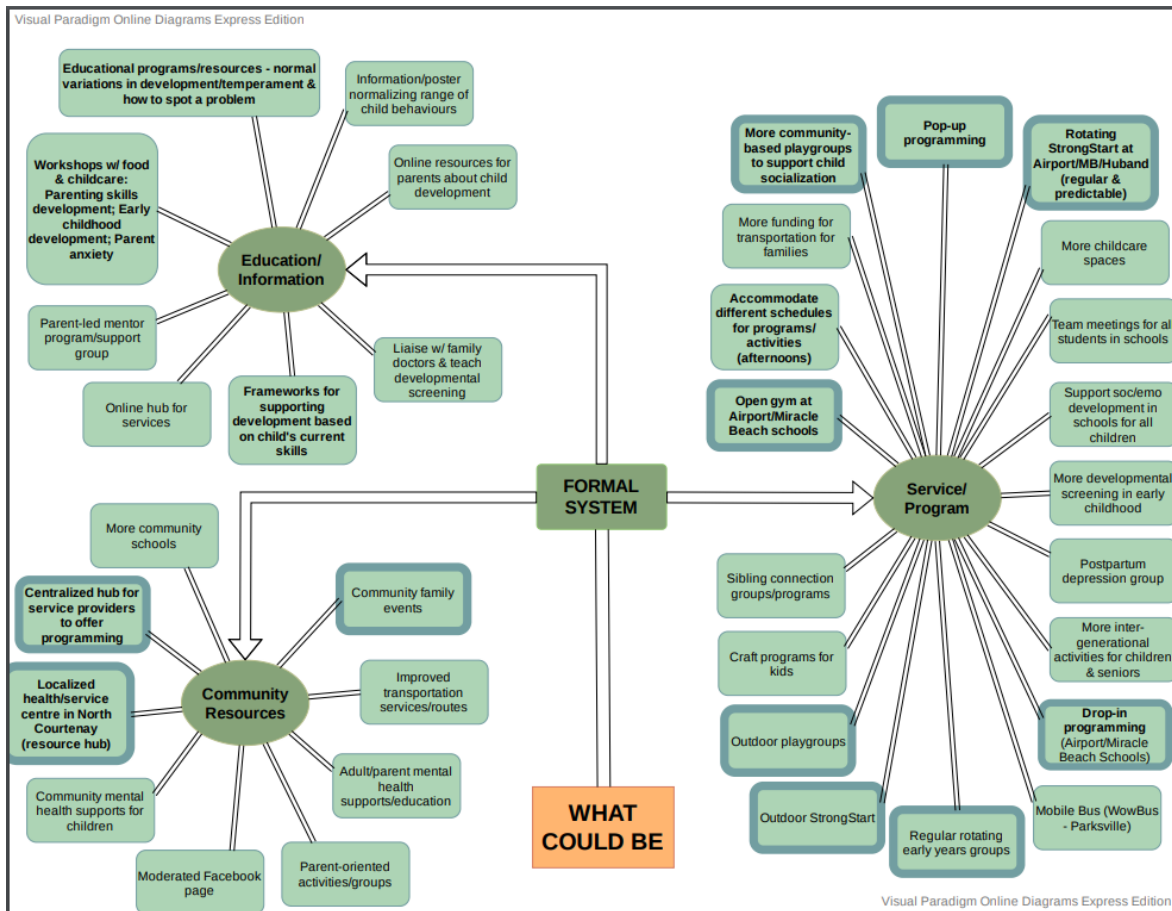
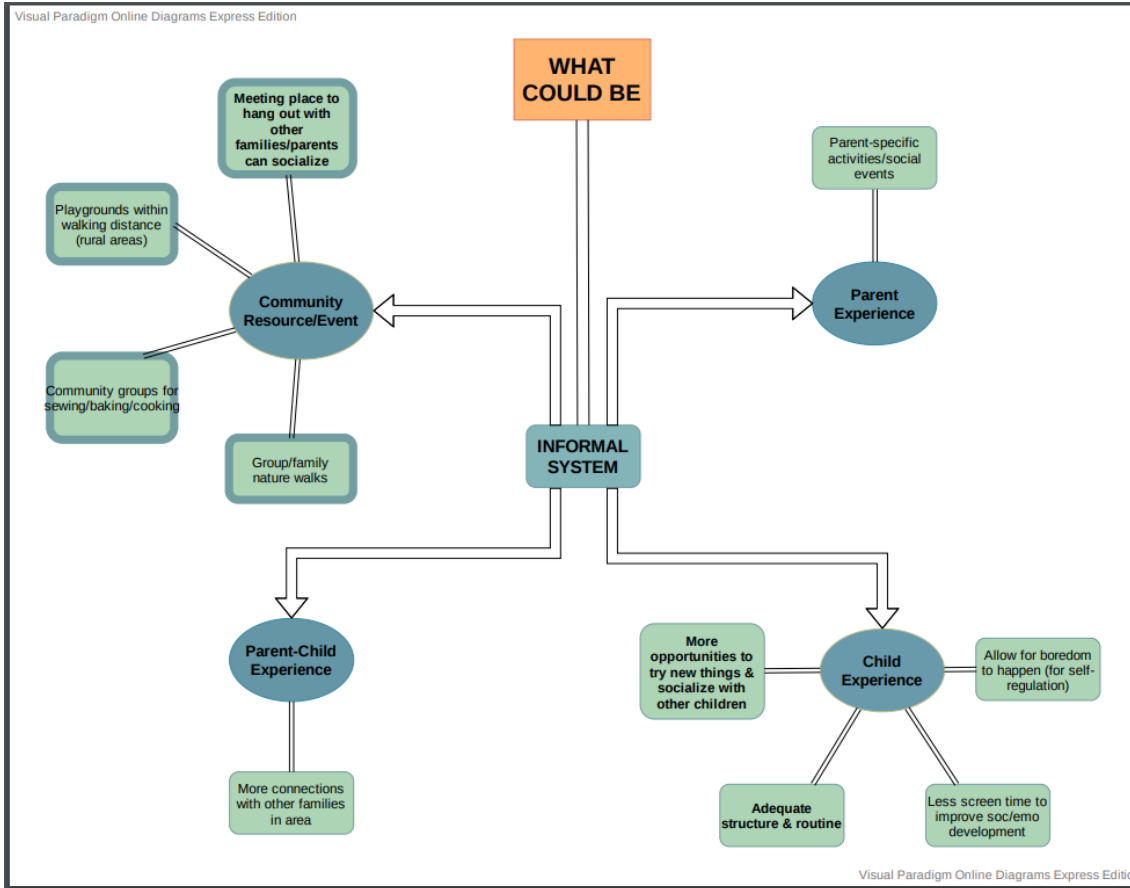
Visual Paradigm Online Diagrams Express Edition

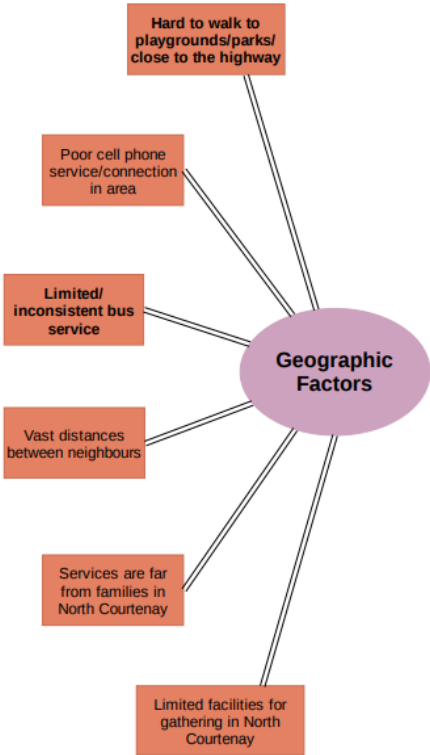
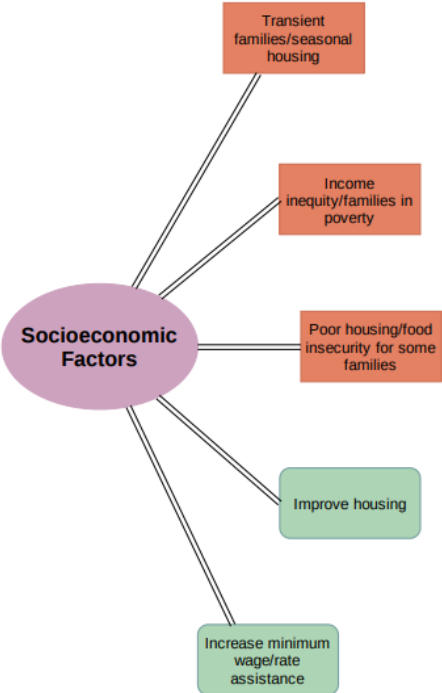


LEGEND FOR DATA MAPS

- Green boxes → strengths/benefits
 - Valley Child
- Red boxes → barriers/challenges
 - Hours of operation conflict with family schedules
- Bolded text** → multiple/similar responses
 - Strongstart**
- Bolded outline** → activity/resource located in North Courtenay
 - Military Family Playgroup**







7.2 NCV Early Years Program Inventory 2021

Black Creek Community Centre	Island Health
Parent and Peanut	Immunizations at MBS
Various recreation programs	Black Creek United Mennonite Church
Childminding	Black Creek Bread of Life Food Bank
Pumpkin Patch Preschool	Comox Military Family Resource Centre
Community Bookshelf (CVLLA)	19 Wing Family Centre (Child Care & services)
Summer Pop Ups (CVCDA)	Family Health Liaison
Valley Family Pop-Ups & Programs	Parents & Tots
SD71	
Come Play (formerly Ready Set Learn) @ each NCV school	
Family Literacy Outreach Programs (multi-partner at Huband)	

7.3 Community Partners

The Building Connections Project is grateful for the support, contributions, and involvements from the following partners:

The Comox Valley Early Years Collaborative	Comox Valley Community Foundation	UBC's HELP Program
Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD)	Vancouver Foundation	Community Health Network
School District 71	MCFD	PacificCARE
Black Creek Community Centre (BCCA)	Today N' Tomorrow Learning Society (TNTLS)	CVRD Area B & C Elected Officials
Island Health/Public Health	Vancouver Island Regional Library (VIRL)	Upper Island Women of Native Ancestry (UIWNA)
Wachiay Friendship centre	Comox Valley Child Development Society	Dove Creek Community Hall
Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC)	CV Lifelong Learning Centre (CVLLC)	Many, many North Comox Valley parents & caregivers
CV Family Services Association (CVFSA) & Healthy Families	Comox Valley Child Development Association (CVCDA)	PlanH Program – BC Healthy Communities Society
Miracle Beach After School Care		

7.4 Potential Funding Opportunities

Funding Source	Description/Eligibility
Vancouver Foundation	Neighborhood Small Grant Systems Change Grants
CVRD	Rural Community Grant
Island Health	Community Wellness Grants
Comox Valley Community Foundations	Community Enrichment Grants due September of each year Small neighbourhood grants due April of each year
Community Action Initiative	Community Counselling Grant
Children's Health Foundation of Vancouver island	At present, seems to be attending to current funding relationships and not pursuing new ones, but good to keep an eye on https://islandkidsfirst.com/community-grants/
Academic	To offset the cost of an Outreach Worker, we potentially draw on a Masters Student who could offer qualitative research and who could benefit from a funding opportunity https://www.mitacs.ca/en/programs/accelerate
Credit Unions	Vancity, Coast Capital, Comox Valley Credit Union https://www.cccu.ca/about/community/community-funding-request
MCFD	Possible funding source
BC Gaming Commission	Not-for-profit organizations providing programs or services of direct benefit to the broader community. Human & Social Service Sector: June 1 to Nov 30
United Way	Healthy Communities, Healthy People Grant: Registered Canadian charities operating local programs may apply for United Way Community Partner Grants. April 16, 2021, noon; Funding begins June 15
Hamber Foundation	Health & Welfare Stream https://hamberfoundation.ca/ Grant Cycles Due March 15/September 15
Alexandra Foundation	A neighbourhood house model. Specific to neighbourhood houses so may not qualify. Apply by April 30 or September 30 https://alexandrafoundation.org/organization-grants/grant-criteria-guidelines/
Victoria Foundation	List of funding opportunities https://victoriafoundation.bc.ca/grants-funding/other-funding-sources/
PlanH	Community Connectedness Grants https://planh.ca/
Daymark Foundation	https://www.daymarkfoundation.ca/

7.5 Success Stories & Promising Practices

Models of Child Development Hubs Outside of Vancouver

This document covers a wide range of hub examples inside and outside of Canada. These hubs are characterized by a central location with a facility able to host childcare and various service provisions. <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/child-hubs.pdf>

Oak Avenue Neighbourhood Hub

A good example of the hub model with the focus of supporting the connections and building communities in a neighborhood context. <https://www.oanh.ca/index.html>

The Seniors Hub of South Vancouver

Although this documents a senior's hub model, there are many elements to their 'Guide to Developing Hubs for seniors' document that can be applied to our circumstances.

Website: <http://www.theseniorshub.org/Toolkit/Guide> -

<http://www.theseniorshub.org/uploads/1/1/4/2/11425458/seniors-hub-toolkit-guide-june-2014.pdf>

South Vancouver Neighbourhood House

The Neighbourhood House concept is similar to that of a Hub that serves a much broader population but involves a neighbourhood approach.

https://www.southvan.org/program_category/childrens-programs/

Community Hubs in Ontario

This document supported the development of this framework and discusses the process of developing hubs and provides a summary of some of the hubs developed in Ontario

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/community-hubs-ontario-strategic-framework-and-action-plan#section-6>

Setting the Hubs Humming

An Australian example focusing on Service integration aimed at building a greater sense of belonging for children and families to services within the community.

<https://www.communityhubs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/setting-hubs-humming.pdf>

House of Friendship

The Neighbourhood and Family Outreach Plan in Kitchener/Waterloo are good examples of how an outreach worker can connect families to more services. This is a poverty based outreach program.

<https://www.houseoffriendship.org/how-we-help/family-neighbourhood-supports/>

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<https://www.ontario.ca/page/community-hubs-ontario-strategic-framework-and-action-plan>

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Comox Valley Wave 7 (2016 – 2019) (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2020).

Source:http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/media/edi_w7_communityprofiles/edi_w7_communityprofile_sd_71.pdf, page 20

Figure 2: Wave 6 Neighbourhood results for Comox Valley (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2016).

Source:http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/media/edi_w6_communityprofiles/edi_w6_communityprofile_sd_71.pdf), p. 14

Figure 3: Pie Chart representing the number of survey respondents (Total=127)

Figure 4: Map of the Comox Valley's EDI results (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2016).

Source:http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/media/edi_w6_communityprofiles/edi_w6_communityprofile_sd_71.pdf), p. 21

Table 1: A snapshot of early years parenting experiences of NCV parents

Table 2: Informal and Formal Support Needs of Families in the North Comox Valley Area