

Ujima Project

Building strong young families

MARCH 2023



The Ujima Project

Young parents often have complex needs and face multiple challenges that complicate their ability to parent. Compared with their adult counterparts, **adolescent mothers:**¹

Have
four times
higher prevalence of
mental health disorders

Are
more likely
to have a history of substance use and
involvement with child welfare

It is also well documented that children born to young parents have worse outcomes, including higher rates of acute illness, developmental issues, lower educational attainment, behavioural challenges, and poorer mental health in adulthood.

By 18 months, children of adolescent mothers:²

53%
Have speech and
language delays

28%
Have growth
deceleration

57%
Are involved with
child protection

Young parents and their children have unique needs that require integrated care supports for both mother and child.



















The Ujima Project is a one-stop model of access to services that aim to improve early outcomes for at-risk parents by supporting the early development needs of underserved, vulnerable young parents/caregivers (29 and under) and their children (0–6 years).

The Ontario Association of Young Parent Agencies (OAYPA) comprises 21 agencies working together to champion a comprehensive system of prevention, early intervention, and treatment services that meet the needs of young parents and their children across Ontario. The OAYPA received 3-year project funding from an anonymous donor and is working with the sector to implement standardized evidence-informed tools and programs in order to demonstrate the impact of the young parent and infant sector.

¹ Van Lieshout, 2020; Dion et al., 20212; Thompson et al., 2015

² Kumar et al., 2016; Elfenbein & Felice, 2003; AAP/Pinzon & Jones 2012; Leslie & Dibden, 2004; CPS/Thompson, 2016; Hodgkinson et al., 2013

Programs and services are being delivered through **9 Early Childhood Development Hubs** located across the province:

 Abiona Centre formerly Massey Centre and Humewood House  Central and North Toronto	 Fresh Start Supportive Services  London/St. Thomas	 Regina's Place  Hamilton East/ Lower Mountain
 Rosalie Hall  East Toronto	 Rose of Durham Young Parents Support Division  Durham Region	 St. Martin's Manor  Hamilton West
 St. Mary's Home  Champlain, Eastern Ontario	 Youville Centre  Ottawa	 Monica Place  Waterloo Region

Abiona Centre is the lead agency and trustee.

Ujima

**pronounced oo-JEE-mah,
is the third principle of Kwanzaa and means
"collective work and responsibility."**

Program Overview

The Ujima Project focuses on serving young mothers who are typically underserved in the community by connecting them to individualized support, information, and the programs and services they need to nurture strong, healthy attachment and attuned relationships while also fostering the development of early language and literacy skills within the family unit.

Ujima Project Hubs transforms the lives of young parents and their children in the communities where they live through the following programs:



Family System Navigation

Parents are supported to identify their needs, set goals, and get access to essential community programs and services (e.g., housing, food security, etc.). Families are also referred to specialized supports for parents and children and intensive case management.

Through the Young Families Program (YFP) at The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids), parents are directly connected to specialized supports, including a pediatrician, nurse practitioner, social worker, and child psychiatrist.

Family System Navigators:

Support young parents to access resources, navigate systems, and advocate for services

Support and improve the social determinants of health of young families

Empower young families to be independent and advocate for their rights

Increase self-efficacy engaging with and accessing services and supports



Early Language and Literacy

Early language and literacy are supported through interactive engagement with parents and children using songs, rhymes, stories, and activities. Parents are also provided with tangible strategies and routines to support growth and development with language and literacy.



Baby Love Program

Baby Love is an evidence-based preventative intervention program that helps caregivers foster secure attachment relationships with their babies. This program is designed to support parents in learning about healthy attachment and the importance of making babies and toddlers feel secure.



Developmental Screening

Parents are supported to complete the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (developmental screening tool) for children aged 2 months to 6 years. The screenings support parents to identify where their child falls in the typical developmental milestone timelines. Ujima Project staff use the tool to empower young parents to have an active role in their child's ongoing development and to identify where a child needs more support.

The Ujima Project by the numbers



9
Early Childhood
Development Hubs
established across Ontario



700+
At-risk, vulnerable, young
families benefited from
immediate and direct support



516
Young families
provided with family
navigation support

through 1,541 encounters, which included intensive supports and connections to local resources such as housing, food security, employment, income and education supports, and physical and mental health referrals



54
Early Literacy
groups facilitated



14
Baby Love
groups held



213
Families connected to the
Early Literacy Specialist
for support



449
One-on-one Early Literacy
sessions offered



59
Referrals to speech-
language pathologists



533
Ages & Stages
Questionnaires and 133
Developmental Support
Plans completed with 280
unique families



12
OAYPA member
agencies trained in core
competencies

2022 Findings

The evaluation framework and tools were finalized using a robust engagement process involving a variety of stakeholders, including staff, leadership, and young parents, to ensure that the evaluation approach is credible, strategically relevant, and useful to stakeholders.

Preliminary Ujima Project evaluation findings suggest that these supports are having an important impact on participating young parents:

Results suggest that Baby Love groups are engaging and inclusive for young parents and that these groups are contributing to young parents' skills in regulating their emotions, understanding their child's needs, and connecting with their child in adaptive ways.

Results also suggest that Family Navigator and Early Literacy Specialist support is being delivered in a way that is caring and inclusive and that it is helping parents to:

- ✓ Access important services for themselves and their children
- ✓ Gain a stronger understanding of how their emotions as a parent influence their children and how they can regulate their own emotions
- ✓ Overcome difficult situations as parents and anticipate difficult parenting situations before they occur
- ✓ Feel more confident that they can find and access the right services needed to support themselves and their children
- ✓ Improve their relationship with their child
- ✓ Receive more equitable access to early childhood development programs (especially for children of adolescent mothers) across the province
- ✓ Increase confidence in accessing services and navigating systems
- ✓ Access developmental screening using the ASQ

Participant Reflections



"I feel more comfortable asking for help and knowing that it's ok to need help."

- Narrative Reflection Respondent

"Life as a young parent was scary, challenging and worrying. After being in contact with everyone at the project, I felt safe within myself to be the best parent I could be. I felt supported knowing that I wasn't alone, and there were people and resources out there to help. I felt confident in my future and look forward to what it brings."

- Narrative Reflection Respondent



"Being connected to Ujima Project has changed my approaches to parenting in a positive way. It has given me strategies for dealing with my children."

- Narrative Reflection Respondent

"I have been able to bond with my youngest, improve my relationship with my oldest, and provide a space for us to interact with others."

- Narrative Reflection Respondent



Participant Reflections



"I have never been more thankful for a program and a worker before. Without the help I received, I fear I would have ended down the wrong path. For that, I am forever grateful for [my Family Navigator] and the Ujima Project."

- Narrative Reflection Respondent

"I have taken into consideration that, yes, I have feelings and they matter, but my children also have feelings that matter as well. I have learned a lot about positive parenting and learning to get down to my children's level and understand their feelings a lot more. They have big feelings as well and don't always know how to explain, and therefore [they end up] acting out. I've learned a lot more patience and communication skills with my children, our bond has become better. Less fighting all around."

- Narrative Reflection Respondent



"I was fleeing from an abusive relationship and the resources from the Ujima Project allowed my children and I a place to live and helped us secured our new home. It also helped me to maintain my mental health and a free environment for my children."

- Narrative Reflection Respondent





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Ontario Association of Young Parent Agencies
serving infants, children and young parents - together

l'Association Ontarienne des Agences pour Jeunes Parents
servir nourrissons, enfants et jeunes parents - ensemble