



Ujima Project

Building strong young families



Ujima Project Impact Report

MARCH 2024



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

SickKids[®]

Message From Ontario Association of Young Parent Agencies President



As we reflect on the past year of the Ujima Project, it stands as a testament to transformative collaboration and dedicated service, significantly enhancing the lives of over 2,766 vulnerable young families across Ontario.

Initiated in April 2022, the Ujima Project has made remarkable strides in delivering high quality, evidence-based programs. These initiatives have been crucial in addressing mental health and early childhood development needs, while also confronting the systemic barriers that often hinder access to specialized services. The project's success is a shining example of our commitment to making a real difference in the community.

Collective work and responsibility explicit in the naming of the Ujima Project has, informed by the voice of youth, brought us a shared understanding of the client needs, the interventions that are effective and the motivation to continue to collaborate with our partners to create a responsive system to address the unmet potential to the young parent sector.

Our achievements are anchored in the strong partnerships we have built and deepened with leading organizations like SickKids Young Families Program, Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion, Empowered Kids Ontario, and the George Hull Institute of Childhood Trauma & Attachment. Equally significant is the collaboration with numerous community agencies and providers through our Ujima Early Childhood Development Hubs, which has been instrumental in enhancing outcomes for the families we serve.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the Ujima Project team – a group of dedicated, passionate professionals who are not just employees but champions of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Their unwavering commitment and exceptional service have been vital in advocating for change in the systemic challenges these young families face.

Our heartfelt thanks go to our donor, whose generous support has been pivotal. Your contributions have enabled us to demonstrate the profound impact that can be achieved in the young parent and infant sector through collective effort.

Looking ahead to the third year of this project, I am filled with optimism. We aim to further amplify our impact by expanding the Ujima Project's services, nurturing our existing partnerships, and establishing new connections. Our shared goal is now to bring the Ujima Project to a sustainable model, with the sector leading an integrated model of best practices and ultimately eliminating historical systemic health inequities for this population. Together, we will continue to champion the needs and potential of this vital community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ekua Asabea Blair'.

Ekua Asabea Blair

President, Ontario Association of Young Parent Agencies

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:**

Have
4x
higher prevalence of mental
health disorders ¹

Are
more likely
to have a history of involvement
with child welfare ^{2,3}

Children born to adolescent parents are more likely (than children born to older birth parents) to develop **delays in speech, language and cognitive development.** ^{4,5}

Many adolescents who are pregnant or parenting likely experience adverse childhood experiences of **gender-based and intergenerational trauma and violence** as well as lack of access to safe and accessible supports and services. ⁶⁻⁹ In addition, recently published research found that between 1991 and 2021, Ontario teens who experienced a pregnancy had a **50 per cent higher risk of premature death** by approximately age 31 compared to those who did not become pregnant as teens. ¹⁰

Adolescent parents have been identified as a population with specific developmental needs and associated health issues that require an approach to care different from their adult counterparts, informing the creation of clinical practice guidelines, especially those facing **inequities of the social determinants of health.** ¹¹⁻¹³

¹ Van Lieshout RJ, Savoy CD, Boyle MH, Georgiades K, Jack SM, Niccols A, et al. The mental health of young Canadian mothers. J Adolescent Health. 2020;66(4):464–9.

² Dion A, Klevor A, Nakajima A, Andersson N. Evidence-based priorities of under-served pregnant and parenting adolescents: addressing inequities through a participatory approach to contextualizing evidence syntheses. Int J Equity Health. 2021;20(1):1–12.

³ Thompson RA. Social support and child protection: Lessons learned and learning. Child Abuse Negl. 2015; 41:19–29.

⁴ Baudry C, Tarabulsky GM, Atkinson L, Pearson J, St-Pierre A. Intervention with adolescent mother–child dyads and cognitive development in early childhood: a meta-analysis. Prev Sci. 2017; 18:116–30.

⁵ Rutman D, Hubberstey C, Poole N, Schmidt RA, Van Bibber M. Multi-service prevention programs for pregnant and parenting women with substance use and multiple vulnerabilities: Program structure and clients' perspectives on wraparound programming. BMC Pregnancy Childbirth. 2020 Aug;20(1):441.

⁶ Roche A, Kostadinov V, Fischer J, Nicholas R, O'Rourke K, Pidd K, et al. Addressing inequities in alcohol consumption and related harms. Health Promot Int. 2015;30(suppl_2): ii20–35.

⁷ Comack E. Coming back to jail: Women, trauma, and criminalization. Fernwood Publishing; 2021.

⁸ Weber A, Miskle B, Lynch A, Arndt S, Acion L. Substance use in pregnancy: identifying stigma and improving care. Subst Abuse Rehabil. 2021; 12:105.

⁹ Miller H, Lorber S, Vandermorris A, Thompson G, Thompson M, Allen L, Aggarwal A, Spitzer R. No, you need to explain what you are doing: Obstetric care experiences and preferences of adolescent mothers with a history of childhood trauma J Pediatr Adolesc Gynecol 34 (2021) 538–545.

¹⁰ Ray JG, Fu L, Austin PC, et al. Teen Pregnancy and Risk of Premature Mortality. JAMA Netw Open. 2024;7(3):e241833. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.1833

¹¹ Powers Makia E., MD, MPH, FAAP, Takagishi Jennifer, MD, FAAP. Committee On Adolescence, Council On Early Childhood. Care of Adolescent Parents and their Children. Pediatrics. 2021; 147 (5).

¹² Thompson Gillian NP. Canadian Paediatric Society, Adolescent Health Committee. Meeting the Needs of Adolescent parents and their Children. 2016;21(5):273.

¹³ Fleming Nathalie MD, O'Driscoll Teresa MD, Becker Gisela RM, Spitzer Rachel F. MD. Canadian Paediatric and Adolescent Gynaecology and Obstetricians (CANPAGO) committee. Adolescent Pregnancy Guidelines. 2015; 327.

Young families have unique needs that require a variety of integrated care supports for both parent and child.

The Ujima Project is a **one-stop model of access to services** that aim to improve outcomes for young families by supporting the early childhood development and service navigation needs of equity-deserving parents (29 and under) and their children (0–6 years). Many young families entering parenting experience multiple, compounding adversities and minimal support. Historically underserved, vulnerable youth and their child have improved access to developmental services through low barrier early identification, intervention, and service navigation.

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. OAYPA received 3-year project funding from an anonymous donor and is working with the sector to implement standardized evidence-informed tools and programs to demonstrate the impact of the young parent and infant sector.

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



Abiona Centre is the lead agency and trustee.

Program Overview

Ujima Project is a **multi-site, targeted intervention project** offering a comprehensive service model for young parents seeking assistance with their children's early developmental needs. Combining a focus on family navigation, early literacy and early childhood development, this initiative implements standardized evidence-based services and trauma-informed, wrap-around supports for equity-deserving young parents and their children.

Rationale

- Entering parenting with minimal supports with a heavy burden of complex developmental trauma, Adverse Childhood Experiences and mental health conditions
- Increased success of reaching full potential with early identification and attachment-focused programs and services
- Inequity in Access to Programs and Services – Young parents need support to navigate the system resources
- Speech and Language Delays – early intervention will optimize school readiness and success

Adolescent Mother Statistics

36%

Live in poverty¹

71%

Live in equity-deserving neighbourhoods¹

28-64%

Have experienced trauma¹

58-94%

Have a mental health diagnosis¹

40%

Have more than one mental health problem²

45%

Have children that have expressive language delay³

Project Goals

- Improve outcomes for equity-deserving parents (29 and under) and their children (0-6) by supporting their system navigation and early developmental needs
- Build core competencies across the young parent and infant sector
- Enhance sector-wide implementation of evidence-based practices
- Demonstrate impact to young parent and infant sector
- Provide education, training and support to Ujima staff/young parent and infant sector that facilitates a community of practice, professionalism, leadership and retention for host agencies

¹ Harden et al., 2009; Endmans Black, 2008; Pinzon, 2012/2021; Thompson et al 2015; Harrison et al 2014; Van Lieshout et al 2020; Hovdestad et al, 2015.

² Hodgkinson et al, 2014; Barnett et al, 2008; Reid & Meadows-Oliver, 2007; Norris et al, 2016; Van Lieshout et al 2019.

³ Oxford et al, 2006; Morinis, 2013; Beitchman & Browlie, 2014; Gutman et al., 2018 Hollo et al., 2014; Cohen, Farnia, Im-Bolter, 2013.

Program Overview

Each Ujima Project Early Childhood Development Hub is comprised of a **Family Navigator** and **Early Literacy Specialist**, integrated within a larger young parent and infant agency. They work together providing seamless access for young families to comprehensive agency services. The Family Navigator and Early Literacy Specialist take a **family-centered, strengths-based approach**. Ujima Project staff use an anti-oppressive and trauma-informed approach with the goal of reducing barriers to participation, thus improving outcomes for at-risk, vulnerable young parents and their children.



Family Navigator

- Connects young parents/caregivers and their families to access resources, navigate systems, and advocate for services
- Empowers young families to be independent and advocate for their rights
- Addresses and improves the social determinants of health of young families
- Increases the self-efficacy of young parents/caregivers in engaging with and accessing services and supports



Early Literacy Specialist

- Conducts early and regular developmental screening
- Offers group-based programming and individual sessions to promote early literacy, learning and school readiness
- Provides early referral to:
 - SmartStart Hubs including speech and language pathologists and other child development specialists
 - Specialists at SickKids Young Families Program/Telepsychiatry
 - Other early childhood development specialists

Ujima Project by the numbers



9

Early Childhood Development Hubs opened



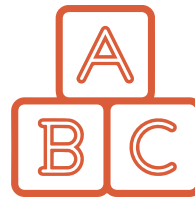
2,766

At-risk, vulnerable, young families benefitted from immediate and direct support



1,702

Young families received family navigation support through **8,404** encounters



251

8-week early literacy groups facilitated



57

Baby Love groups held



1,916

Young families referred to the Early Literacy Specialist



1,191

Young families supported by an Early Learning Specialist through **2,873** individualized sessions



200

Preschool speech and language referrals to regional SmartStart Hubs



1,874

Ages & Stages Questionnaires and **471** Developmental Support Plans for **813** children



20

OAYPA member agencies trained in Ujima core competencies

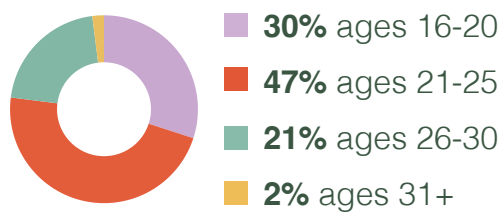
2024 Evaluation Results

Working with an external evaluator (Taylor Newberry Consulting), an evaluation framework and logic model was co-designed with Ujima Hub staff, Hub leaders, and young parents. The evaluation was designed to assess whether the programs were reaching their intended population and meeting project goals. This evaluation consists of several evaluative tools, including intake data; a retrospective pre and post survey; a survey for the Baby Love program; focus groups with parents, Hub staff, and leaders; and a narrative reflection activity.

For both the retrospective pre/post and Baby Love surveys, median scores were calculated for pre- and post-program survey items, along with a Wilcoxon signed-rank test that measures whether there were meaningful changes between pre- and post-program survey questions. In cases where data is ordinal, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test is preferred over other statistical tests.

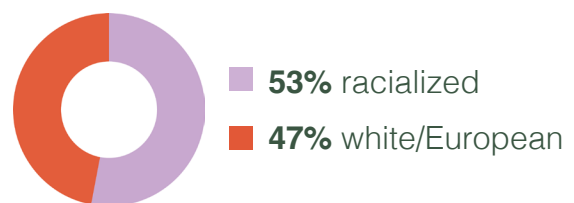
Ujima Project is reaching its intended population

The young parents accessing Ujima Project services have the following demographic characteristics:



36%

Accessing social assistance
as main source of income



83%

High school education
or less

Impactful nature of Ujima Project services in supporting vulnerable young parents

The retrospective pre/post findings for increased access to parenting & social support, and increased knowledge of support needs within social determinants of health framework among parents showed a large effect size of .71 to .96 in the following areas:

- ✓ Increased access to appropriate **referrals**
- ✓ Enhanced access to **parenting** and **social support**
- ✓ Increased confidence in **addressing their children's needs**
- ✓ Increased **advocacy** skills among parents
- ✓ Increased confidence in **navigating systems**
- ✓ Increased ability to **build healthy bonds** with their child(ren)
- ✓ Improved **connection** with their children, feeling more eager to spend time with their child and help them with their needs

Program Specific Findings

Baby Love: A Core Ujima Project Service

Baby Love is an evidence-based preventative intervention program that helps caregivers foster secure attachment relationships with their babies (2-15 months). It was designed to support parents in learning about healthy attachment and the importance of making babies and toddlers feel secure. Babies who have a secure internal working model believe that their caregivers are available when needed and that they are safe with them. They go on to function better in many ways, for the rest of their lives (e.g., Goldberg, 2000).

Evaluation Results:

21 pre- and post-program Baby Love survey items explored whether the program helped increase participants' knowledge of positive parenting practices. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the items using a 5-point agreement scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We performed a Wilcoxon signed-rank test to measure the median differences between pre- and post-survey responses and tested for significant changes in agreement scores after completing the Baby Love program. Two survey items showed a significant and positive change. When surveyed, parents were more likely to agree that:

They pay attention to their baby's signals (e.g., crying, sounds, gestures) and try to understand them post-Baby Love program (with an effect size of .50).

When their baby signals that they need something, they can correctly figure out what they need most of the time (with an effect size of .50).

When surveyed about **Baby Love**, 100% of participants (n=48) agreed or strongly agreed they:

Thought the Baby Love facilitators were knowledgeable about the topics covered in the program.

Enjoyed participating in the Baby Love program.

Felt comfortable in the Baby Love program.

Felt supported by the Baby Love facilitators.

Learned new information.

Would recommend the program to other parents.

Would use information shared in the Baby Love program in their parenting practices.

"I have really liked the Baby Love program. Not only did [Ujima Project staff] teach me, but they also helped me apply it and give examples in real life with my daughter. This is an amazing program and can help lots of people." – Young Parent

Program Specific Findings

Developmental Screening – Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)

Supporting the early developmental needs of underserved young parents and their children is a critical goal of the Ujima Project. Standardized use of the developmental screening tool Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) for regular and routine development screenings and intervention of the child's developmental progress helps **identify potential developmental delays and concerns** and **allows for early intervention** through the creation of individualized Developmental Support Plans, and when warranted, a referral to specialized services. Detecting and addressing developmental concerns at an early stage can improve outcomes for young parents' children, which is a vital component of school readiness potential for children. Social emotional and developmental delays in children can be subtle, so multiple screening opportunities for each child are essential for proper detection of them.

The Ujima Project has received incredible education, training and support from SickKids Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion (IEMHP). OAYPA is aligned with IEMHP in our perspective and philosophy that “a cost-effective approach to early intervention consists of targeting these interventions to children at risk. Developmental screening not only identifies these children, but even points to at-risk developmental areas for a child. This could mean a specific path of referral for a child but also early childhood educators, teachers, and caregivers tailoring their teaching and strategies to meet the child's particular needs”.¹

“Developmental screening describes the use of standardized tools to assess a child's developmental progress and identify areas of potential concern. Developmental screening is endorsed by the Canadian Pediatric Society, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization”.²⁻⁴

¹ Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion, SickKids. Screening for Success A Policy Brief on Implementing Developmental Screening for Children Aged 0-6. Accessed March 1, 2024. <https://imhpromotion.ca/resources/Documents/Resource%20Library/Screening%20for%20Success/Screening%20for%20Success.pdf>

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Developmental Monitoring and Screening. Published February 14, 2023. Accessed September 27, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/screening.html>

³ Williams R, Clinton J, Bennett S, Hertzman C, Leduc D. Getting it right at 18 months: In support of an enhanced well-baby visit. Paediatr Child Health. 2011;16(10):647. doi:10.1093/pch/16.10.647

⁴ World Health Organization. Monitoring Children's Development in Primary Care Services: Moving from a Focus on Child Deficits to Family Centred Participatory Support.; 2020.

Partnerships



SickKids Partnership

Ujima Project is grateful to have a partnership with SickKids Young Family Program, Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion (IEMHP), and Telehealth/Telepsychiatry services. The Ujima/SickKids partnership allowed for the provision of Hub specific supports and telepsychiatry services.

This partnership:

- Provided collaborative clinical consultations with an interprofessional healthcare team including access to psychiatrists, paediatricians, adolescent medicine specialists, social workers, nurses, nurse practitioners and Speech and Language Pathologists
- Strengthened team relations and standardized practices, creating a community where staff can bring cases and discuss specific practice issues, brainstorm and share ideas and knowledge with others across the sector and bring new ideas to their work
- Allowed staff to embed the theoretical and practical learnings into programs and services for our infants and children
- Helped standardize practice modalities (e.g., trauma informed care, harm reduction, motivational interviewing)
- Ensured everyone across the Ujima Project had similar knowledge and skills, providing unprecedented professional development that affected every aspect of their daily work with the young parents

"It has been an incredible experience for the interprofessional health professionals at SickKids to work with the hub site teams. It has created a community of practice – a space for shared learning and debriefing – to collectively share strategies, resources and space with an overall goal to enhance and ultimately better support the resilient young families we work with."

*- Gillian Thompson, Nurse Practitioner,
Paediatrics/Young Families Program, SickKids*



Empowered Kids Ontario (EKO) Partnership

OAYPA/Ujima Project is grateful to partner with EKO to support young families in accessing the specialized child development and rehabilitation services offered by its members across the province.

"EKO proudly partners with OAYPA to improve young parents' early access to healthcare for their kids. Empowered Kids Ontario members deliver child development and rehabilitation care close to home, all across the province. Through relationships with young parent agencies, EKO members are learning how to reach more of those children with developmental differences whose young parents might be reluctant to seek help. Thanks to our partnership with OAYPA, EKO has a role to play in helping build a better care system for young parents – one where this equity-deserving population feels heard and respected".

- Jennifer Churchill, President, EKO

Program Specific Findings

Raising Awareness

The Ujima Project has been a vital contributor to **improved sector-wide collaboration, capacity, and awareness**. 2023 was a critical year for putting OAYPA and the young parent and infant sector “on the map” and strengthening alignment and partnership with local and regional partners as well as various system partners including Empowered Kids Ontario, Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, and deepened our relationship with the Ministry of Children and Community Social Services.

Community/ Regional Collaboration

As a result of the success of the Ujima Project, Hub staff reported:

- Increased collaboration among sectors serving young parents
- Greater awareness of the needs of young parents
- Increased capacity to deliver evidence-based interventions for sectors serving young parents
- Improved sector-wide collaboration, capacity, and awareness
- New partnerships and connections with community-based organizations in their local communities
- Opportunities to participate in academic, organization, association knowledge sharing activities- attend /present at conferences, host community discussions and host webinars
- Outreach approaches SmartStart Hubs, EarlyON Centres, libraries, community centers, and Child Development Centres throughout Ontario

Staff Capacity

Ujima Project has significantly increased the capacity of the Hub staff to provide the level of intensive support required to help our young parents and their children. Thanks to the Ujima Project, hubs were able to:

- Build new partnerships and bring in new parents to the Hubs
- Build capacity within their agencies, which in turn, gave them space to build their presence within the community
- Find more time to establish their own identity and name recognition throughout the community
- Find time and space to develop new referral pathways with existing community partners
- Take on young parents that other service providers could not accommodate or that did not have the skills to engage the most vulnerable, service-hesitant clients that are often lost to follow-up or not trusting of systems
- Create an ASQ Community of Practice where staff discussed how the learning activities that help children move closer to their developmental milestones can be embedded in programs and services for our infants and children
- Discuss and share evidence-based programs and services and best practices across hubs
- Provide leadership opportunities for practice champions including presenting at community partnership activities, conferences and webinars

Young Parent Quotes



"The workers signed me up for Christmas care without me asking. They really are wonderful at helping me find every resource available to me. Because of that, there was a great weight lifted off my shoulders at Christmas time."

- Ujima Parent

"I like to do activities with my daughter and let her play the way she wants to, even if it's messy. As long as she's safe I don't mind the mess. After participating in the [redacted] I've learned more activities to let my daughter try out but most importantly I have discovered ways to play WITH her. We can sing songs together, play with sensory items together, and play on each other's level. I feel that playing with her has made us more connected and lets her know she can bring anything to her mom, and we can do it together."

- Ujima Parent

"Being a First Time Mom, I didn't have a lot of resources when it came to my son. After a conversation with my family facilitator, I was able to make a plan for my future and access resources to help with the day-to-day journey of life."

- Ujima Parent

"Being connected has given me more drive to engage in activities and interact with my children more."

- Ujima Parent



"Some things I have had help with include when [redacted] was younger they helped with teething, they helped me keep track of the milestones and goals he's reached, they have shown me how I can regulate our emotions, especially as he got older - they teach him more advanced stuff like reading ,writing, saying lots more words. Currently we're working on getting him potty-trained and it's all going super well."

- Ujima Parent



"There has been so many times where I have needed support. My family navigator is amazing at finding us resources and being there for appointment and so much more."

- Ujima Parent

"[Ujima Project Service] has provided more insight on my children and their needs and how to respond appropriately."

- Ujima Parent



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For more Information about the OAYPA or the Ujima Project, please [visit our website.](#)



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