

# How can I help create community through the children at the Ontario Early Years Centre (OEYC)?

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## Biography



Elizabeth grew up in Haldimand County and has enjoyed working with young children in both the Haldimand and Norfolk communities for the past thirteen years. As a graduate of the Early Childhood Education program, when she heard about the new Ontario Early Years Centres, she knew it was the job for her. The philosophies of the Ontario Early Years Centre match closely with Elizabeth's. She believes that parents are their child's first teachers and the first six years are the most important. Elizabeth is glad to support parents and caregivers so they have the information and support they need to raise happy

healthy children.

## Abstract

*The community is growing rapidly and as a consequence, many parents do not know each other and do not have the time or opportunity to meet and share concerns and successes. This article describes the impact on a community of having an Early Years Centre to meet and learn about parenting.*

The centre has ten different locations through Haldimand and Norfolk. The centre offers programs in conjunction with community need and input from the families.

I work primarily at the Caledonia site of the Ontario Early Years Centre Haldimand and Norfolk. The centre is located on the main street close to two schools, shopping, churches and Tim Horton's. The Centre is a welcoming place for parents and caregivers and children.

We offer:

- Play and learn drop-in programs
- Toy lending and resource library
- Early Literacy information and workshops
- Parent and caregiver workshops
- Quality childcare information
- Car seat clinics
- Preschool speech and language intakes
- The Parent Info Line

As an Early Years Facilitator I have been able to offer my skills and experience within the Caledonia community. I have learned what the parents in the Caledonia community are looking for from the Ontario Early Years Centre. Families are able to communicate their needs to us informally during conversations at the centre, through our yearly surveys, ongoing workshop evaluations, suggestion

box and parent advisory committee.

In March 2005 we completed a participant survey for all the Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYC) sites. The participant surveys are a snapshot of the centre, conducted over one week period. The parents and caregivers were asked to rate the activities they enjoyed the most at the centre. Two findings were significant to me. First, 81% of participants surveyed rated opportunities to interact with other parents and caregivers as an important need the centre can meet. Second, creative activities and interacting with other children was in the top four priorities for parents at the centre.



Parents were coming to the centres because they saw the value in providing their children with play and learn opportunities for early literacy skills, as well as social skills. Caledonia is a rapidly growing community with acres of farmland turning into subdivisions. Many of our parents are new to the Caledonia area and are often looking for some ways to meet friends and to develop a sense of community.

### Creating Rural Roots

I met Candace at the Ontario Early Years Centre in Caledonia. She had heard about the centre from the health nurses at the Well Baby Clinic that was held at the local library. The Well Baby Clinic now runs out of the OEYC in Caledonia. Candace enjoyed our parent library and often borrowed resources. She and her daughter often attended our Just You and Me Baby program. We sang songs, completed make-and-take activities, and engaged in rich discussions on various topics related to parenting infants. As the trust level grew I learned Candace had been married for a couple of years and was enjoying parenthood and farm life.

She explained that this was something different for her because “in her past life” she would not even answer the door without being fully dressed in a nice outfit and her hair and makeup done. Candace married a farmer, and is enjoying her new life most of the time. She was looking forward to being able to stay at home, raise her children, and be able to run the farm with her husband. Her new responsibilities would be caring for the animals. Wow, what a lovely life. Living on the farm with horses, pigs, fresh air and a wonderful new family!

When I met Candace, she and her family was living on her in-laws’ farm. This arrangement allowed them to save money to purchase their own farm. She told me about a day when she went out to the barn to do the chores. She opened the barn door and...the barn was flooded. A water pipe had burst and spraying water in every direction, the pigs were running loose and splashing all over the barn. Candace, our lovely princess (not so long ago), stood in the middle of it all and sobbed! Just then her mother-in-law came out to the barn. The words came out of her mouth before she even thought about what she was saying. “Do something!!” Since then Candace was moved into her own beautiful

horse farm and is expecting her second child!

Candace is a great mother and is looking forward to providing her children with a nurturing rural upbringing. Being a city girl gone country, she told me her old friends are still doing their hair and shopping. Candace spends her time doing chores and riding her horse. She attends the Ontario Early Years Centre regularly looking for information on various parenting and child development topics, as well as peer support and playmates for Michaela. She also attends the Well Baby Clinic held by The Haldimand Norfolk Health Unit.

“At the Ontario Early Years Centre, Candace was talking about how her barn is fully equipped with an excosaucer and jolly jumper so Michaela would be safe and happy while she did the chores. Just then a sympathetic voice came from the crowd. It was a woman by the name of Samantha. Her daughter was about the same age as Michaela. She knew EXACTLY what Candace was talking about! You see she had horses too. It was also her responsibility to care for the farm while her husband was out in the fields or working away from the home. Well it was amazing; they just started chatting away like they knew each other forever. I think they connected because they each knew what it felt like to balance the responsibilities of motherhood and the farm.

As the conversation progressed they learned that they lived not far from each other. Soon they were making plans to get together. They formulated a plan that would make both of their jobs a little easier and a lot less lonely. They would work in the barn at Candace’s together one day and then at Samantha’s the next. Supporting each other reduced farm chores and eyes and hands to mind the children.

This day at the centre will stay with me for a long time. It was so exciting to sit and listen to two women with the same goals and values who are so willing to support one another!!” (Journal Entry February 14<sup>th</sup>).



### **Caledonia a rapidly Changing rural community**

The Ontario Early Years Centre is only one of the new things happening in Caledonia. Over the past few years Caledonia has greatly increased in size. The rural scenery of Caledonia is changing into growing urban communities with farmer’s fields changing into subdivisions rapidly. Many of the parents I have met have moved here from other communities such as Toronto, Oakville, and outside of Ontario. With extended family living further away I feel that parents are looking for a place to talk with adults about what is happening in their lives and with their children.

So what happens when there are so many new villagers? Long time residents of Caledonia tell me about a time where they knew the faces of parents and children walking down the street. Now the town is very busy with lots of new traffic and new faces and seemingly endless construction of

homes and businesses I can see why they feel like strangers in their hometown.

I often thought the rural families living amongst acres of farmland as isolated families; Haldimand and Norfolk Counties together would equal the size of Prince Edward Island. However, I was not fully aware how isolated some of the residents of Caledonia are feeling.

One mother who attends the Play and Learn Drop-In program explained her theory about why families are not meeting each other. This is what she told me that it is the garages that cause the people on her block to be isolated from one another. She watches a car come down her street, pull into a driveway, the garage door opens and then into the garage the car goes. The garage door closes behind them then the family enters the house through the garage. She told me it was different when she lived in Hamilton. In Hamilton the people parked on the street (NO GARAGES). She would see her neighbors regularly and have an opportunity to chat with them. She made some good friends and it felt good knowing her neighbors. She attends the centre so she is able to meet people herself and her children can make some new friends. She finds it difficult to meet people even though she lives in Caledonia. She and her husband own a small business, and work long hours. One day she asked me if she could use the phone. She called her husband to ask him to come right away and see how much fun the children were having. Her message to him was that he was needed at the Ontario Early Years Centre. She thought that even though he was so busy working she hoped he could stop by to see how wonderful it is at the centre and see how much her children and herself benefit from the centre.

“I conducted a tour with a long time resident of the community, and someone I grew up with. She lived on a farm on my road. As we spoke about the centre, she reflected on her time as a parent in a rural community. She was impressed with the existence of the Ontario Early Years Centre. She told me she sees value in a place where parents can chat and to begin to feel connected with one another in their own community. . She felt that the opportunities for the children to socialize with each other would be beneficial for the children now, and when they attend school. As a young mom she would have liked an opportunity to talk about children and child development with professionals as well as other parents. She remembers silently wondering about child development and what to do in certain situations with her children” (Journal entry Feb. 15<sup>th</sup>).

“I wish there was a place like this when I was a kid!” (Participant Survey March 2005).

## **Becoming part of the village**

The Ontario Early Years Centers are welcoming places for families and their children. Each exists to be a gateway to supports for parents and caregivers of children birth to age six. We offer programs, referrals and opportunities to chat with other professionals. Every day I see more and more support coming from the wonderful relationships that are forming between parents, grandparents, caregivers and children.

It was our vision that the OEYC would be decorated with warm colours, natural items and homey furnishings. We feel this will help provide an atmosphere just like home.

“This place is like a community living room” (Janice Giles Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit).

Adults and children using the centre wear name tags. I believe this promotes conversations. Parents introducing their child to a new friend and uses their name. This would not be possible without the use of nametags.

“One day in the house centre a little girl wanted to play. A mom said to her child, “Let’s let Daniel play too, I bet he likes to cook.” The child seemed to feel welcome and more comfortable. These children are good friends now” (Journal entry March 23 05).

“We have always had positive experiences at the OEYC. My children ask to come on days when it is closed” (Participant survey March 2005).

During the introduction of new parents I pointed out similar things, such as children of the same age or living in the same area. Pulling parents with similar experiences into conversations, then removing myself from the conversation fostered relationships. One mother and her infant has been with us since we opened. In the beginning she would be one of the only parents at the afternoon program. Time passed and the afternoon program started to receive more attendance. She has met people and had been observed having discussions with other parents about childhood issues. Her son came here as a tiny baby, he is walking now and is making some little friends of his own. (Journal entry March 24/05)

“We love the centre! Would like to see more nighttime hours. Staff are great. They always remember my kids and myself-which is so nice!” (Participant survey March 2005).

Families that are new to Caledonia learn about the services in the community as a result of attending programs. New parents and caregivers may not be aware of the programs until they share their lives with children. Families receive information about the Well Baby clinics, parenting programs, childcare, car seat clinics, child development and activity ideas to do at home with their children just to name a few of the benefits. The centre has community bulletin boards listing upcoming community programs and events as well as many brochures from other agencies. Parents can access community information from the toll free Parent Info Line and Online at [www.hney.ca](http://www.hney.ca) the parents also have access to the Internet on a computer at the centre.

The OEYC values our community partners. Partners are invited to share space so the centre becomes the hub of services for children ages 0-6 within the community. We share our Caledonia centre with the Haldimand and Norfolk Health Unit’s Well Baby and breast-feeding clinic and additional services. Parents and caregivers can bring their children to have their teeth checked thanks to Kim Casier, a Dental Hygienist with the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit. The Haldimand-Norfolk Community Action Program for Children uses space at the centre to run various parenting programs such as COPE and Right From the Start. Often the programs are run collaboratively with our partners. I feel this makes it a little easier for parents to attend the program. The families are comfortable at the centre and are able to see some familiar faces while at the program.

“Pleased with the staff, their energy and enthusiasm is appreciated. This is a wonderful, comfortable, safe environment” (Participant survey March 2005).

Home childcare providers visit the centre. There are opportunities to attend the Home Child Care Network meetings at the centre as well as professional development workshops. In the past, Early Childhood professionals parents and caregivers have had to access resources in Hamilton and Brantford. We have been able to provide a small resource centre here in Caledonia that includes a laminator, photocopier, paper cutters and die press machines. Other Early Childhood professionals, parents and caregivers are able to borrow story extenders, theme boxes and toys from the onsite toy lending library to enhance other children's programs in the community. It is through resource sharing and networking with others that we will provide quality programs in our community.

### **My Philosophy: It takes a village to raise a child**

How have we moved from this environment to one of being so independently minded and distant from one and other? Women today seem to be admired for their ability to do it all. The house, the children, maybe a part-time job, hockey practice, and maintain nice hair, makeup and a stylish wardrobe. Not to mention supper on the table when her partner gets home. Our children are praised for independence. At one time human beings lived in large family groups; in some cultures this is still the case. I believe that in this environment other mothers could pitch in and help when needed. Young women learned from what the older women in the community modeled for them. A mother's voice was backed up by the voices of many. When the children interacted with each other they formed social skills. Many hands, eyes, ears, generations and hearts were working together to raise the children.

As I grow as a person and reflect on this world I wish to pass on the insight that life is full of ups and downs, rights and lefts bliss and despair. It is a journey. It is how we accept this in each other is what is important. Everyone has a special skill or quality to pass on. When we have kindness and compassion for others in our community, we all benefit. As humans on this journey in life together it is the support we give and receive that really counts. With support the tough bits are not so tough. The kindness we show others that will be passed on to our children. Let your children catch you in a random act of kindness.

...children and family investments thrive on collaboration in order to work and work effectively. They also require leadership at all levels and business leadership at a high level. As the saying goes, "it takes a village to raise a child"...so when igniting the reaching out to children and families flame, please remember that influencing a child's future and our community's future - is one of the most important choices we'll ever make! It's time we get right down to business.

Charlie Coffey  
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Government Affairs & Business Development RBC Financial Group  
*Haldimand-Norfolk R.E.A.C.H. 24<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting*  
Jarvis Community Centre  
Jarvis, Ontario

Thursday, June 2, 2005

## Making our own village.

“I have the pleasure of watching parents leaving the centre with a burst of confidence because that day at the centre someone told them they were doing a great job. I have seen parents stand a little taller after offering advice to someone else and making something a little easier for them. I have seen parents leave the centre together for the first time heading to McDonald’s and starting a brand new wonderful friendship!” (Journal March 24/05).

I believe that all parents do the best they can. All children and parents are individuals with their own strengths and special qualities. It is an absolute joy to see the relationships forming at the centre. Parents and caregivers look forward to seeing each other and know the centre is a place where they can come to get what ever they need. That may be a parenting program, Early Learning Program, referral to a community program, or even a friendly face, a shoulder or an ear!

“Glad to have the centre in town” (Participant survey March 2005).