

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

There is a growing consensus that the early years of life are critical in the development and future well-being of children.¹ During the first years of a child's life, his or her brain and nervous system undergo immense development. What happens to children from conception to five years of age helps to establish the foundation for how well they will do in all facets of their lives.

Canada's National Children's Agenda (NCA) identifies five critical environmental influences that affect a child's development: biological inheritance; family; child care and school; physical and community environments; and society.¹ While it is recognized that children are shaped by the world around them and that many environments can affect their development, the most influential environment is that of the family.

Parents have a critical role in providing a nurturing environment that includes stimulation, protection and structure in order for children to successfully adapt to the developmental tasks associated with the pre-school years.² At the same time, families are shaped by the physical and community environments in which they live, as well as by economic and societal influences.

In September 2000, the Government of Canada, Provinces (except Quebec) and Territories agreed to improve and expand the services and programs they deliver to children under the age of 6 years and their families. *The Early Childhood Development Agreement* is a long-term commitment to help young children reach their full potential, and to help families support their children.¹ As part of this commitment, First Ministers agreed to report on investments in early childhood development programs and services, as well as on the health status of children.

There have been several studies conducted over the past 10 years that have examined health outcomes among children. However, there are significant gaps in information on children, particularly at the local level. For example, the 1994/95 National Population Health Survey, the 1996/97 Ontario Health Survey and the 2000/01 Canadian Community Health Survey only included respondents who were aged 12 years and older. The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), started in 1994, is following a cohort of children aged 0 – 11 years by surveying them or their parents every two years until they reach adulthood. While this has been one of the best sources of information on the development of children in Canada, analyses at the local level are not available. The Region of Peel's *Child Health Report 2002* identified a number of important gaps in the available information pertaining especially to children of pre-school age.³

In January 2002, Public Health Units across Ontario received provincial funding to conduct Perinatal and Child Health Survey Strategy initiatives. The funds were to be used to address information needs in support of Early Child Development. This included information needs for a broad range of health status outcomes and risk factors related to maternal, pregnancy, infant and child health (child defined as children between the ages of zero and six years of age). Health units were initially given funding for a period of one year, from January to December, 2002. Additional funding was subsequently made available for the calendar year 2003.

To address these issues, Peel Health developed a telephone survey using items from existing survey instruments where possible. The balance of this report will focus on findings related to the Peel Pre-School Survey conducted in 2002, and will draw comparisons to provincial or national statistics when they are available.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Peel Pre-School Survey 2002 were:

- to establish baseline information from mothers of children aged 0-4, concerning their knowledge about and behaviours regarding a wide variety of health topics
- to identify health issues for Peel children aged 0-4 years of age
- to identify barriers to accessing health services, and opportunities to enhance health information, in order to direct and position the Early Years information campaigns.

Although the objectives of the study intended to examine children aged zero to four years, the actual results yielded information pertaining mostly to those aged zero to two years. This was a function of having asked parents with more than one child to answer questions based only on their youngest child.