

NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier University



Three Laurier researchers help evaluate Ontario's Better Beginnings program

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WATERLOO — It's final exam time for the Ontario government's long-running Better Beginnings, Better Futures research project.

Three Laurier community psychologists — Geoffrey Nelson, Mark Pancer and Colleen Loomis — are involved in a recently announced \$1-million study, funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre, to evaluate the impacts of the provincial program, which involves children in three economically disadvantaged communities in Ontario.

The evaluation study will be conducted over three years and is headed by Queen's University psychologists Wendy Craig and Ray Dev. Peters.

Launched in 1991, the Better Beginnings, Better Futures program had three primary goals: to reduce emotional and behavioural problems in children; to foster emotional, behavioural, social, physical and cognitive development in children; and to strengthen the ability of communities to respond to the social and economic needs of children and their families.

About 1,400 children at eight sites became involved in the program at age four. The children and their parents participated in before- and after-school programs and a variety of parent-support programs, including home visits, parenting workshops, clothing exchanges and enhancements to child care.

Preliminary results have shown that children involved in the program have less anxiety and depression, better overall health and reduced special education needs. Even parents' smoking rates

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dropped. Community members volunteered in large numbers and played an important role in shaping the Better Beginnings projects.

The point of the program initially was to see if juvenile crime rates and other problems could be reduced by attacking social problems at their roots. That's been the theory for many years, and this study is examining the results of 16 years of community-based prevention programs for children to see if the theory holds up.

“But we're not just looking at criminal involvement,” says Nelson, who has been involved in the program from the start, along with Pancer and Gary Cameron from Laurier's Faculty of Social Work. “We're also looking at mental health, education, and how well these children and young adults are doing in relationships.”