

## BACKGROUND

In March of 2020 many supports available for expecting or new parents in Ottawa shut down or severely limited access due to the emerging COVID-19 Pandemic. In response, Carlington Community Health Centre developed an online parent support strategy for parents pregnant or parenting infants under 3 months of age. The initial focus was rapid information dissemination during a period of hourly changes in service availability and to facilitate access to information and services. Group parenting sessions are offered covering topics such as breastfeeding, infant sleep, infant crying, infant safety, maternal mental health, as well as infant behavior and development. Individual parent support is available for those requiring/requesting a greater level of support. This program is offered on a Facebook private group platform with sessions offered through Zoom.

## METHODOLOGY

Anonymous Surveys were created and delivered to all members of the Ottawa Prenatal Breastfeeding Support Facebook Group during the month of October.

Analytics were gathered through Facebook and Zoom session attendance from the period of April 1<sup>st</sup> to November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020. Parents willing to share personal stories were interviewed and their stories were shared in the evaluation report.

## PURPOSE/OBJECTIVE

To evaluate the Virtual Parent Support Initiative in an effort to improve, support and promote the health and well-being of the people and diverse communities served by Carlington CHC. This evaluation will aid in learning and continuous improvement by requesting parent feedback on the services provided including strengths and gaps. It will ensure accountability and build a case for sustainability.

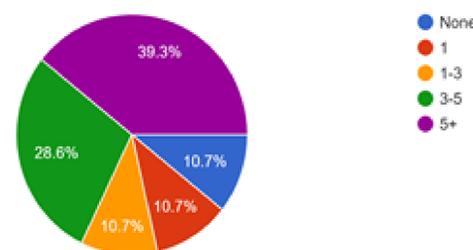


*“This virtual program has facilitated a sense of community and reduced my sense of isolation during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic.”*

## DEMOGRAPHICS

There were 54 virtual parenting sessions with 469 participants  
 100% of participants were pregnant or parenting their first baby  
 Participants were from all across the region  
 Over 50% of participants attended at least one session with their partner  
 Once clients came to the sessions, they stayed-even when their children passed the three month stage.  
 Nearly half of the respondents had also asked for one-on-one support outside of the sessions

How many virtual ZOOM parent support sessions on Tuesday's have you attended?  
 28 responses



## OUTCOMES

- 100% report that they have gained knowledge on infant/child development
- 96% report that they have gained confidence in parenting
- 88% report a sense of increased wellness from participating in the zoom sessions
- 88% report a sense of decreased anxiety from participating in the zoom sessions
- 87% report an increase in knowledge around responsive parenting
- 80% report having changed their parenting behaviors to be more responsive
- 61% report that they have a stronger sense of community since joining the Facebook group
- 82% report knowing about more regional services, including breastfeeding support, since joining this Facebook group
- 54% have accessed services they learned about in this group
- 14% agree to have made other parent friends in this group
- 100% would recommend the group to others

*“I really looked forward to the sessions, it was something to pin my week to.”*

## KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- 100% client satisfaction was reported. Clients are happy with the services that they have been receiving and the platforms used to share information/ support (Facebook/Zoom). They consistently reported reduced anxiety, increased parenting confidence, improved sense of well being and increased sense of community.
- Clients reported improved knowledge and understanding of infant/child development and the majority of those surveyed said that they had changed their parenting practices to be more responsive towards their infants.
- Over 50% clients are attending sessions with a partner. This is significant as it is optimal to be able to message both partners. It is also important to make sure the content is created and delivered in such a way as to be inclusive of partners and engage them.
- 14% of clients report not having any ongoing close support. This must be taken into consideration when programming and engaging through parent support groups. Additional effort should be placed towards identifying negative maternal mental health and providing resources, outreach services and referral.
- Participants requested expanded information (3-6 month and 6-12 months) and more availability after 4 pm. We recommend expanding the virtual platform to provide significantly improved access to support and resources in collaboration with other community stakeholders as it is clear that this platform reduces significant barriers to families parenting through early infancy (transportation, fatigue, support, weather etc.) irrespective of a pandemic scenario.
- Although all participants surveyed felt confident using the social media and zoom platforms we recommend adding a question to the general Carlington client survey that asks specifically about program accessibility through Facebook /Zoom.
- Clients are very clear that they would like this form of online support to continue even after the pandemic as it reduces barriers to support all new parents face.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the cancellation of many services available to parents including prenatal classes, face to face primary care, Ottawa Public Health Family visiting, visits by public health nurses and face to face visits with Lactation Consultants. Carlington has effectively contributed to filling this gap with this virtual approach to parent support. This program has succeeded in reducing isolation and anxiety for new parents, while improving a sense of well-being during the novel coronavirus pandemic. This program has exceeded expectations and has been shown to be accessible and reduce barriers to participation that having a newborn often entails. The participants reported improved knowledge and confidence as well as reduced isolation and anxiety. They also highlighted profound changes in their parenting behavior towards being more responsive. Parents are adamant that they would appreciate and access this service even if there were not a COVID-19 lockdown in place.