



early childhood community development centre



Young Children Priority First

August 2006

Kiwanis Clubs of Niagara Give Local Children The Gift of Reading... And Much More

Children enrolled in 141 licensed child care centres in Niagara are spending their summer enjoying more than 2,800 new books, thanks to a new initiative by the Kiwanis Clubs of Niagara. The Kiwanis Clubs of Niagara launched **Young Children Priority First** earlier this year, with help from the Early Childhood Community Development Centre (ECCDC) in St. Catharines and seed money from the Trillium Foundation.

"Individually, Niagara's five Kiwanis Clubs all have a long history of projects that benefit children. Working together on Young Children Priority First has allowed us to focus our efforts on enhancing children's early learning experiences, so they learn to read with confidence," says Ed Minchin, President of the Welland Kiwanis Club.

It's a cause that Minchin, a retired school principal, feels very strongly about. "As an educator, I've seen what happens to children when insufficient attention is paid to the development of their language and literacy skills in the years before they start school," says Minchin. "It's like trying to build a house without first putting down a solid foundation. Literacy is the basis upon which achievement in every other subject relies. A child can't be expected to excel in math, science, or computers if he or she doesn't have good reading skills. It's far easier to prevent a reading deficit through early childhood education than it is to treat one that is already limiting a child's success in school."

The books were specially selected by Kiwanis volunteers in consultation with Niagara's Early Literacy Program and the ECCDC. The ECCDC is a local charity devoted to helping child care programs and providers be at their best, by providing them with access to state-of-the-art learning resources and classroom equipment and ongoing professional development. "Included in the book deliveries were books designed for every age of child. From hardboard books with simple pictures and stories for children that are just a year or so old, to books that would appeal to pre-teens who participate in after-school programs run by the centres," says Lorrey Arial-Bonilla, ECCDC Resource Developer.

But books are just the beginning. "As we were planning Young Children Priority First, more and more of our members saw first-hand the need to work more closely with the child care community," explains Minchin. "As our volunteers began visiting child care centres to deliver the new books, they noticed other areas where they could help, such as fixing damaged toys and doing minor repairs to the facilities. "The result was the creation of the Young Children Priority First/Kiwanis Fund, managed by the Niagara Community Foundation, and a host of new projects coordinated by Kiwanis volunteers. Projects planned for this fall include a two-day sew-and-knit-a-thon at Rapelje Lodge in Welland, at

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which seniors will sew and knit new clothes for the girls used in the child care centres, and visits to child care centres to replace bicycles and tricycles that are beyond repair with new ones donated by corporate sponsors.

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"Initiatives like Young Children Priority First make a huge difference to what a child care centre can do for children," says Debbie Bent, Program Coordinator for A Child's World Family Child Care Services of Niagara, which operates 16 centres across the region. "Every child has a favourite book or toy that they go to over and over again. Over time, that's a lot of wear and tear. Many licensed child care programs are run as non-profits. When you're doing everything you can to keep costs down so parents can afford your service, there isn't a lot of money left over to keep repairing and replacing things. By reducing the number of things we have to buy, the Kiwanis Clubs make it possible for us to devote a larger share of our budget to the programming component of our work, so we can keep enhancing the educational experience each child enjoys."

There are other benefits as well, notes Bent. "When the Kiwanis volunteers come to the centres to deliver the books, they spend time with the children. Often, the volunteer assigned to a centre has requested that particular centre because his or her grandchildren go there. The volunteers aren't in a hurry. They take time to pay attention to the children, to read them stories, to get to know their grandchildren's classmates. For the kids, it's a new face and a new voice reading to them. It's a new role model to demonstrate the joy of reading."

"Young Children Priority First is also a big boost for those of us who work in child care programs," says Bent. "It brings us closer to our communities and allows more people to understand how important early childhood education is to Niagara's future. In some cases, Kiwanis volunteers have worked with high schools to get students enrolled in shop classes to help do repairs at the centres. It creates a natural partnership between a nearby high school and the child care centre, so that older siblings and relatives of the children enrolled in the centre can be involved in a volunteer project that has special meaning for them."

Adds Bent, "The smiles on the children's faces say it all. Young Children Priority First works."

To learn more about Young Children Priority First, or for photos or interviews, please contact Tammy McCormick Ferguson, Executive Director, ECCDC at 905-646-7311 or email tferguson@eccdc.org.

