The Better Beginnings, Better Futures project is an exemplar of a partnership between universities, communities, and government. Conceived during the late 1980s and implemented in the early 1990s, Better Beginnings, Better Futures is a large-scale, multi-year, multi-site longitudinal, controlled research demonstration project designed to promote child, family, and community development for young children ages 4-8. The Better Beginnings project was created by the Ontario government in consultation with community stakeholders, primarily in the field of children’s mental health, based on the recognition that prevention, not treatment, is the only possible way to reduce children’s mental health problems. This symposium consists of five presentations that describe the Better Beginnings project and research findings about its long-term effectiveness on children (at ages 18-19), parents, families, and communities. Evaluating outcomes at multiple levels of analysis (i.e., child, family and community), examining cost savings, and using narrative methods to understand outcomes in late adolescence are some of the innovative methodological contributions of this research. Substantively, Better Beginnings is the first Canadian early childhood development (ECD) research demonstration project to show positive short-term, medium-term, and long-term outcomes and cost savings.

This symposium includes 5 presentations, as described, below:

**Better Beginnings, Better Futures: A universal, comprehensive, community-based prevention approach for primary school children and their families**

In contrast with many other early childhood development (ECD) programmes, Better Beginnings is
(a) ecological, with child, school, parent/family, and community development programmes,
(b) long-term, with five years of programming,
(c) driven by parents and community members, who constitute more than 50% of key project committees,
(d) universal (available to all children ages 4-8 and their families in the communities), and
(e) integrated with schools and other services in the community.

Research during the demonstration phase involved a partnership between the project’s Research Coordination Unit (RCU) and site research committees. Research during the demonstration phase included a quasi-experimental evaluation of short-term outcomes on children, parents, families, and the communities, as well as ethnographic research designed to understand the programmes, resident participation, project management, and partnerships with service-providers. Follow-up research on the children and parents was conducted in grades 6, 9, and 12 and focused on outcomes and cost-benefits. Better Beginnings researchers are currently developing dissemination tools for a pan-Canadian dissemination of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures project.

**The Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project: long-term child, parent, family, and community outcomes and cost savings of a universal, comprehensive, community-based prevention approach for primary school children and their families.**

This study examined the long-term impacts of the intervention on children’s family, school and community environments 15 years after the start of the intervention, when the young people who participated in the intervention were 18 to 19 years of age. Compared to youth from comparison communities (n = 225), youth from Better Beginnings communities (n = 401) had significantly lower levels of property offenses, use of
special education services, and perceptions of deviance in the community and significantly better grades in their most recent year in high school and significantly higher rates of exercise. Parents in the Better Beginnings communities were significantly less likely to have someone else in the house who smoked, had significantly lower levels of depression, and had a significantly higher level of sense of community involvement than parents in the comparison communities. Results are discussed with respect to the importance of considering family and neighbourhood contexts in the development and evaluation of prevention programmes.

The long-term impacts of Better Beginnings, Better Futures on the turning point stories of youth at ages 18-19. Better Beginnings, Better Futures is a 25-year demonstration project funded by the Government of Ontario to prevent social, emotional, behavioural, physical and cognitive problems in young children. This study examined the long-term effects of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures programme on youths’ turning point stories at age 18. The sample consisted of youth who participated in Better Beginnings from ages 4-8 (n = 62) and youth from a comparison community who were not in Better Beginnings (n = 34). Controlling for covariates, significant differences favouring youth from the Better Beginnings sites were found on several dimensions of the turning point stories: ending resolution, personal growth, meaning-making, coherence, and affect transformation. Effect sizes ranged from .45 to .75 for these outcome dimensions, indicating moderate to large effects. Also, turning point story dimensions were found to be significantly correlated with two standardized outcomes measures. Youths’ self-esteem was directly related to story ending resolution, personal growth, and meaning making, and youths’ community involvement was directly related to story specificity, meaning making, and coherence. This presentation will also make use of vignettes to illustrate the qualitative differences between youth from Better Beginnings and comparison communities in ending resolution, personal growth, and meaning-making. As positive turning points are related to indicators of well-being, these findings demonstrate that early childhood prevention programmes can produce positive long-term impacts. The findings also suggest the utility of a narrative approach to the evaluation of long-term outcomes of prevention programmes.

Evaluating community participation as prevention: life narratives of youth. Community-based prevention programmes strive to foster the composition of positive life stories, in part, by promoting active participation in community settings. This article uses life narratives of youth to explore the experience of community participation and show how such participation influenced their lives. Youth aged 18-19 years who participated in Better Beginning, Better Futures (n = 62), a community-based prevention programme, when they were aged 4-8 recounted stories of their lives that showed significantly higher levels of participation in community programmes and greater personal impacts of that involvement compared with youth who were not involved in Better Beginnings (n = 34). Qualitative analysis of a sub-sample of these youth (n = 34) revealed individual and community characteristics that were instrumental in fostering positive outcomes of community participation. The findings indicate both the utility of using a narrative approach to evaluate community-based prevention programmes and the value of community participation for children and youth.

Youth narratives on sense of community and community involvement and its relation to participation in an early childhood intervention programme. Adolescents’ narratives about their communities can inform us about how youth experience a sense of community and participate in community life, and whether participation in an early childhood programme may affect these experiences. This study explored sense of community and involvement among 96 adolescents ages 18 to 19, and then compared narratives of these youth by those who participated in Better
Beginnings, Better Futures (n = 64) with those of youth who lived in similar comparison communities that did not have the programme (n = 32). The community involvement stories were coded for various dimensions, including: prosaically content, positivity, specificity, meaning-making, and sense of community (i.e., membership, influence/power, needs fulfillment, place attachment, and emotional attachment). For all youth, the overall means of the narrative dimensions were only moderately specific and positive, with prosaically content and meaning below the “neutral” values of the scale. Stories of all youth revealed that emotional connection (35%) and influence (31%) were most salient followed by needs fulfillment (7%) and membership (4%). Quotations from narratives illustrate these findings and other important themes in youth stories: place attachment, fun, and how their individual power impacts community. Between-group analysis revealed that Better Beginnings youths’ stories had significantly higher specificity (M = 3.11, sd = 1.28) compared to non-BB youth (M = 2.27, sd = 1.12), p < .005, and youth from Better Beginnings sites appear to tell stories with a greater emphasis on emotional connection (χ² = 3.72, p < .05) and on influence (χ² = 2.95, p < .05) than youth from comparison communities. Adolescents’ narratives reveal potentially important characteristics for community intervention programmes. Findings also support the use of narrative analysis when conducting research with youth and for programme evaluation.