

What is Best Start?

Goals of Best Start

Children in Ontario will be ready and eager to achieve success in school by the time they start Grade 1.

To make Ontario an international leader in achieving the social, intellectual, economic, physical and emotional potential of all its children.

Best Start is a government-wide priority. It is one of the multi-year strategic transformation initiatives that ministries will undertake to support the government's key priority of student success. It is a comprehensive and ambitious early learning and care strategy that requires different ministries to work together to address the factors that put young children at risk, and to create communities that support healthy child development and learning.

Best Start is a partnership with parents that recognizes the key role parents play in preparing their children for school. It is also a partnership among ministries and among different levels of government (i.e., provincial, federal and municipal) to help provide the services and supports to help children succeed.

Best Start will:

- Help parents help their children to be successful in school;
- Enhance existing services and introduce innovative approaches to healthy child development, early learning and care; and
- Bring community services together in a comprehensive, flexible, integrated and seamless way so children and parents can access them at familiar neighbourhood locations.

Scope

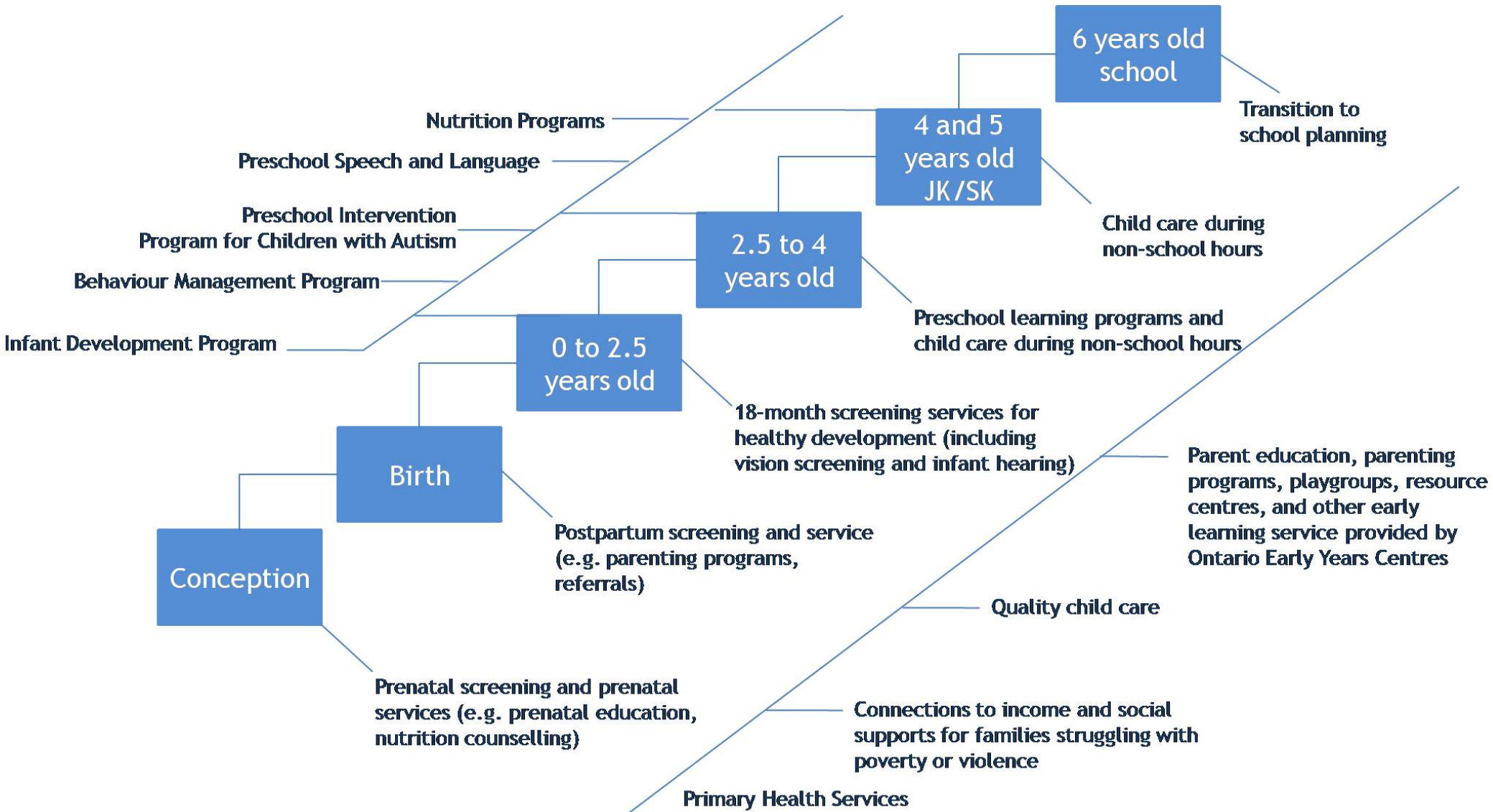
By using an integrated approach to the provision of service at the community level, Best Start will help create a comprehensive system of services that supports children, including francophone, aboriginal and children with special needs, from birth through to the transition into school. Some services, such as parenting programs, health services, infant development services and Preschool Speech and Language will be available to families and children at any time in the early years (i.e., from the prenatal stage through to Grade 1); others, such as screening services or certain learning programs, are provided at specific ages and stages of young children's lives. Best Start includes services for young children, regardless of circumstances.

Best Start is the platform on which we can begin to address the broader determinants of healthy development.

It will:

- Help parents support their children
- Help children in Ontario be ready to achieve success in school when they start Grade 1
- Help make the transition to Grade 1 as smooth, seamless and successful as possible
- Make high quality early learning and care available for our youngest learners
- provide a variety of parenting supports
- Help identify and provide support to children who need extra help
- Build on partnerships with communities and with the federal and municipal levels of government.

Children's Growth and Program Needs



Implementation

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) conducted consultations at a provincial and regional level with key French and English stakeholders. In total, approximately 1,800 people attended the consultations across the province. The goal of the consultations was to seek input on the draft version of the Implementation Planning Guidelines for Best Start Networks. To this end, stakeholders showed significant support for the vision and direction of Best Start and provided valuable input pertaining to the implementation of Best Start. The Implementation Planning Guidelines for Best Start Networks have been revised based on that input.

Best Start is an ambitious strategy. It will take at least 10 years to implement all its components across the province; planning and implementation will be done in phases at the local/community level and led by Best Start networks.

These guidelines are designed to guide the local planning and implementation activities of the Best Start networks. They provide an overview of the Best Start strategy and describe how to establish Best Start networks. They then set out the steps the networks and key partners, such as CMSMs/DSSABs, will take to start planning and implementing Best Start in their communities.

The guidelines are divided into two parts:

- Part I: guidelines for all communities to implement the Phase I components of Best Start.
- Part II: guidelines for three demonstration communities to implement all components of Best Start.

Ontario's Commitment to Children

Putting Our Children First

Our children are our future. The Government of Ontario is committed to putting children and youth first, and developing programs that will support families and help children and youth reach their full potential.

A Ministry Dedicated to Children and Youth

In 2003, the Government established a ministry dedicated to the healthy growth and development of children and youth. The role of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) is to build a more seamless and rational system of services for children and youth.

Its mandate is to:

- Set the government's policy agenda for children and youth
- Lead the implementation of the government's Best Start Strategy working in partnership with other ministries such as Education, Health and Long-Term Care, Community and Social Services, Culture, and Tourism and Recreation
- Influence other ministries to assess their policies and programs for their impact on children and youth
- Manage the system of children's services and deliver some services directly.

Ontario's Vision for Children

An Ontario where children and youth have the best opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential.

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A New Approach to Planning and Managing Services for Children and Youth

Children and youth programs have been brought together under one ministry. Some government-funded children's programs - such as those managed by the Ministries of Community and Social Services, Health and Long-Term Care, and Community Safety and Correctional Services - have been transferred to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Other children and youth programs --such as those provided by the Ministries of Education, Citizenship and Immigration, Culture, and Tourism and Recreation - will continue to be delivered by those ministries, but MCYS will work closely with them and with other community partners to plan and coordinate services. The goal is to help give children the best possible start in life, prepare youth to become productive adults, and make it easier for families to get the services they need at all stages of a child's development.

The responsibilities for children and youth services, which have transferred to MCYS, will continue to be delivered through existing agencies and organizations, such as public health units, children's aid societies, Ontario Early Years Centres, and child care centres. However, the planning for those services will be integrated, which will encourage communities across the province to take a more integrated approach to serving children and families.

How Are Our Youngest Children Doing Now?

Ontario's children are generally doing well. Canada ranks near the top of the world in reading literacy, and Ontario's children are at the national average. But we do have some weaknesses: according to early evidence, as many as one out of every four children in Ontario (25%) may enter school not ready to learn (McCain and Mustard, 1999). Results from the 2003-2004 Grade 3 Provincial Test revealed that only 54% of English-language students achieved the provincial standard for reading, 58% for writing, and 64% for mathematics. Results of the French-language students are 49% for reading, 63% for writing and 55% for mathematics.

We also know that factors such as maternal depression, teen pregnancy, poor health, isolation, poverty, and disabilities may put young children at risk for poor learning.

Ontario's population has a relatively high rate of postpartum/maternal depression (10 to 15% of women, 26% of teens) - much of which goes undiagnosed and untreated. We also have a high rate of teenage pregnancy: 5% of live births in Ontario are babies born to teens. The 2004 Report Card on Child Poverty indicates there are 373,000 children living in poverty in Ontario. That's a 35% increase since 1989, (Campaign 2000, Report on Child Poverty in Ontario, 2004).

These are problems we must address if we want children to reach their full potential.

What is the Most Effective Way to Support Young Children?

We know that the family is crucial to helping children develop learning skills, and that programs that enable families to support their children while they are young are highly effective (Mustard and McCain 1999; Hertzman and Keating, 1999). We also know that high quality licensed child care (centre-based or home-based), which involves parents and helps children develop cognitive and social skills can help children be ready for school (Peisner-Feinberg et al, 1999). This knowledge is being used to guide all programs for young children and families