

# **YWCA Beatrice House Research Report**

## **Executive Summary**

### **June 2007**

The following is a summary of a two year research project centred on YWCA Beatrice House, a transitional residence for homeless mothers and their children. The research was conducted by Janette Pelletier, Ph.D. of the Institute of Child Study, (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, with the assistance of researchers Laura Cheng, Almina Pardhan, Courtney Snare, Helen Taylor-Allen and Christine Davidson of the Laidlaw Research Centre at the Institute of Child Study, OISE/University of Toronto, who assisted with editorial and administrative support.

YWCA Toronto wishes to acknowledge the Beatrice House staff and mothers who participated in the research. Copies of the full report may be obtained by contacting YWCA Toronto at [spalmateer@ywcatoronto.org](mailto:spalmateer@ywcatoronto.org).

YWCA Beatrice House (hereby referred to as Beatrice House) is an integrated family-centred education and training centre for homeless mothers and their children in downtown Toronto. Beatrice House supports these families on their journey to economic self-sufficiency and stability. Beatrice House provides quality early child development for children and is committed to helping mothers to become independent and to develop feelings of self-worth. The program provides professional skills development and personal counselling for mothers and benefits children through the on-site early child development programs for infants, toddlers and preschoolers, as well as recreational programs for older children. Beatrice House accommodates 27 families, who may stay up to two years.

This report presents a summary of the research literature on homelessness and shelter life and the results of a two-year research study of the Beatrice House program. The research focused on mothers' experiences in Beatrice House and on the quality of the early learning environments located on site in Beatrice House. The research was designed to identify practices that appear to contribute to the success of Beatrice House and to provide information about areas of potential future development.

The findings of the research are organized in two sections corresponding to the two foci of mothers' experiences and the children's early learning environments. The first set of findings presents mothers' experiences at Beatrice House in 2005 and in 2006. The findings were derived from focus groups and from individual interviews with mothers who agreed to participate in the research. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, then categorized into meaningful themes that emerged from the data. Results from 2005 and 2006 are presented together and compared. Field observations of the researchers were included as additional descriptive information.

The second set of findings presents the quantitative results of the quality ratings of the three early learning environments: Infant, Toddler and Preschool. The environment quality results are presented both descriptively and in graph form. The descriptive results provide detailed observations that attempt to compare ratings from 2005 to 2006. The graphs provide a visual representation of the scores received in 2005 and 2006 for each sub-scale of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998/2005) and for overall average environment quality.

Twenty mothers agreed to participate in the research. Research with vulnerable populations such as this is difficult to carry out because mothers may feel threatened by sharing their views. Informed consent processes mean that only those mothers who fully understand the implications of their participation and who are willing to disclose information about their lives agree to participate. Women in the 2006 group were significantly less agreeable to research participation. Due to the uneven participant group sizes in each year, there were two focus groups with mothers in 2005, but only one focus group in 2006. In addition, a staff focus group was held in the spring of 2005 to draw out issues that were pertinent to staff.

When informed consent was obtained, the focus groups with staff and mothers and the individual interviews with mothers were carried out. Quality ratings of the early childhood care and learning environments were obtained using a standardized research tool: The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998/2005).

## **FINDINGS**

Beatrice House staff reported that “empowerment” and “respect” underpin their goals. These goals were met by supporting mothers, conveying a sense of family, and preparing mothers for their futures. Staff want to help mothers to “turn their lives around.” A secondary goal is to provide high quality early learning and care. A follow-up program is designed to support families through monthly support once families leave Beatrice House. Because of the on-site integration of Beatrice House programs, staff believe that there is greater continuity for families. Staff also acknowledged challenges associated with a group of mothers and children living in close quarters. These challenges are intensified because of features related to the physical environment, for example, programs and facilities located on different floors that are only accessible by staircases. Another challenge related to mothers’ expectations of child development was the staff and mothers’ own parenting behaviours. Children often experience discrepant care giving practices in the early child development centre and “at home” with their mothers. Staff recognized that mothers and children often feel “stigmatized” by living in a shelter. Staff also reported the difficulties inherent in reconciling their own lives and freedom with those of the women with whom they work. Administrative challenges include the length of stay of families at Beatrice House. Often they are offered permanent housing after six to nine months and leave Beatrice House even when they could further benefit from the program. Administrators expressed concern for staff, particularly the heightened emotional involvement of this work.

Despite some of these challenges, staff reported that Beatrice House children experience many successes. Children, particularly children who have had experiences of abuse, learn

to trust adults again. They develop a secure base through the teachers. Children begin to respond to other children and to adults after a period of time. Not having to be rushed from place to place for various programs or being made to trek around the city gives children a greater sense of calm. The early child development program has helped mothers learn to relax and learn along with their children. Since the children are in good quality care, mothers can focus on their own goals.

Results of the focus groups and interviews with mothers were categorized by predominant themes that emerged. One theme addressed the challenges of being a mother. The most common response among all mothers in both years related to disciplining their children. Financial difficulties and being a single parent were among the other most reported challenges. When Beatrice House staff were interviewed, they mentioned that one of the program goals was to assist mothers in developing appropriate discipline strategies. Thus the Beatrice House program was directly in line with what mothers perceived to be a challenge for themselves.

Another theme involved the challenges of living at Beatrice House (i.e., in a shelter). In line with the staff comments, mothers reported that the physical environment, specifically the necessity of climbing stairs, was the greatest challenge. Secondary challenges related to living in close quarters with other women and children, and feeling under the watch of staff. However, there was great variability among the mothers regarding their perceived challenges; these differences point to the varied needs of a diverse group of mothers and thus to the difficulty in drawing any overall conclusions about their perceived challenges of living at Beatrice House.

Mothers spoke at length about why they liked Beatrice House. Two areas stood out as special features of living at Beatrice House. The first was mothers' positive perception of the Beatrice House early child development program and the Beatrice House staff. The second was the perceived support from other mothers. There were many other reported benefits; however, these results show that the greatest perceived benefit of Beatrice House is the staff, along with specialists who visit. This finding is consistent with other research on intervention programs that show that "relationships" are keys to success.

Another theme that emerged was mothers' goals for themselves. Finishing school and finding a job in order to become self-sufficient were reported as the most important goals. This result points to the importance that Beatrice House gives to providing high quality early learning and care for children so that mothers are able to achieve their goals.

Mothers also reported on the rewards of motherhood, clearly expressing joy in their children, particularly in watching them grow and seeing them happy. A number of mothers mentioned the rewards of "unconditional love" from their children and feeling rewarded by being responsible for their children. Overall these findings suggest that while the emotional satisfaction of the mother-child relationship was important, it was also important for mothers to assume their parental responsibility.

Mothers' goals for their children were similar to their goals for themselves, in particular, the goal of getting a good education. Another important goal was to see their children happy and become good people. Mothers did not want their children to make the same mistakes that they themselves had made. Overall this finding points to the critical role of education in these mothers' goals for themselves and their children. Mothers felt that it

was through a good education that they and their children would achieve success and happiness.

Three concerns stood out in common among mothers. The first was never having enough time for themselves, for their children or for getting things done. The second was being alone and not having a father for their children. The third was not having enough money, which led to lack of stability. This finding is consistent with Beatrice House's goal to help mothers have time for themselves to achieve financial self-sufficiency and stability.

There were four areas in common about which mothers reported feeling happy: feeling relaxed and peaceful through living at Beatrice House, being able to "have their children" with them, staff support, and having a career. This result highlights the importance of Beatrice House as a safe haven, a place where mothers can get their lives turned around while their children are able to stay with them. In essence, these results show that Beatrice House is accomplishing its goals to provide transitional assistance of the kind that mothers report they most need.

The researchers kept informal field notes of their observations during the focus groups and interviews, and these notes were summarized to provide additional insight. One observation was that mothers were afraid to "go back out there" for fear of falling back into old patterns. Another observation was that mothers felt that living at Beatrice House was relaxing and took a burden off of them; it took away a lot of their stress (mainly financial). In essence, Beatrice House made mothers feel safe. Mothers spoke of the strain of trying to raise children on their own with little income and therefore they particularly appreciated the staff at Beatrice House. Mothers seemed to be very grateful for the improvements they had observed in their children while living at Beatrice House. Mothers praised the excellent programs for young children, but some mothers thought there could be more programs for older children. The issue of quality child care being available to homeless women and children was raised repeatedly. Women reported that they liked the fact that the child care was on-site with their housing.

The results of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale study showed that the Beatrice House early child development centre program is of good to high quality, with many areas in the infant, toddler and preschool programs of excellent quality. While there were a few specific areas, particularly in the infant and toddler programs, that have room for improvement, overall, there was not significant change from Year 1 to Year 2.

This summary of results shows the match between mothers' goals and those of the Beatrice House programs for women and children. It also shows that the Beatrice House early child development program is generally of high quality, particularly in relation to interaction factors between staff and children. The detailed report highlights the outstanding work that Beatrice House has done in the women's program and in the early child development program and highlights some areas in which Beatrice House may want to consider change for the future.