

## **The Program**

The *Baby Connections*® program is a free, research-based program that educates parents and caring adults of 6–12-month-old babies about the positive impact they can have on their baby’s brain development and their development of language and emergent literacy skills.

In the 2022 program year, the *Baby Connections* program was delivered both, in-person and online, through its virtual adaptation: *Baby Connections @ Home*™. The parents and caring adults participated in the program with their babies and attended a minimum of four sessions, during which, trained Facilitators delivered key messages, practical strategies and coaching about the importance of literacy and early, meaningful, face-to-face interactions with young babies. During each session the parents/caring adults also first explored the take-home materials and resources their baby received as part of participating in the program. The materials in the kits were carefully selected for their educational value, safety, durability, and fun!



The program’s goal is to empower parents/caring adults to provide a literacy-rich environment at home for their baby. It helps build a habit of parent engagement and involvement, thus laying the foundation for baby’s healthy development, placing them on a positive life trajectory.

- **426 participants**
- **428 babies received the *Baby Connections* Kit**
- **48 programs**
- **2 new Program Partners in 2 new Regions**

## **The Participants**

The *Baby Connections* program was delivered to 426 parents/caring adults with babies through 48 programs. There were 428 *Baby Connections* kits delivered to families, ensuring that each baby received a full kit. (Two families with twins received a kit for each baby.)

Participants included babies between 6-12 months of age, parents, grandparents, ESL families and families from low socio-economic backgrounds. Along with the typical group setting, the program was also delivered one-on-one by trained Facilitators who implement the Region of Waterloo Public Health’s Healthy Babies Healthy Children program (screens all new births and supports those deemed at high-risk with at-home visits) and the Infant and Child Development program (provides services for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers at risk of or who are experiencing developmental delay). Lastly, Project READ (provides proactive family literacy programming for families receiving Ontario Works –OW provincial income support and Ontario Disability Support Program –ODSP) also offered the program to their families with young babies.

## The Impact

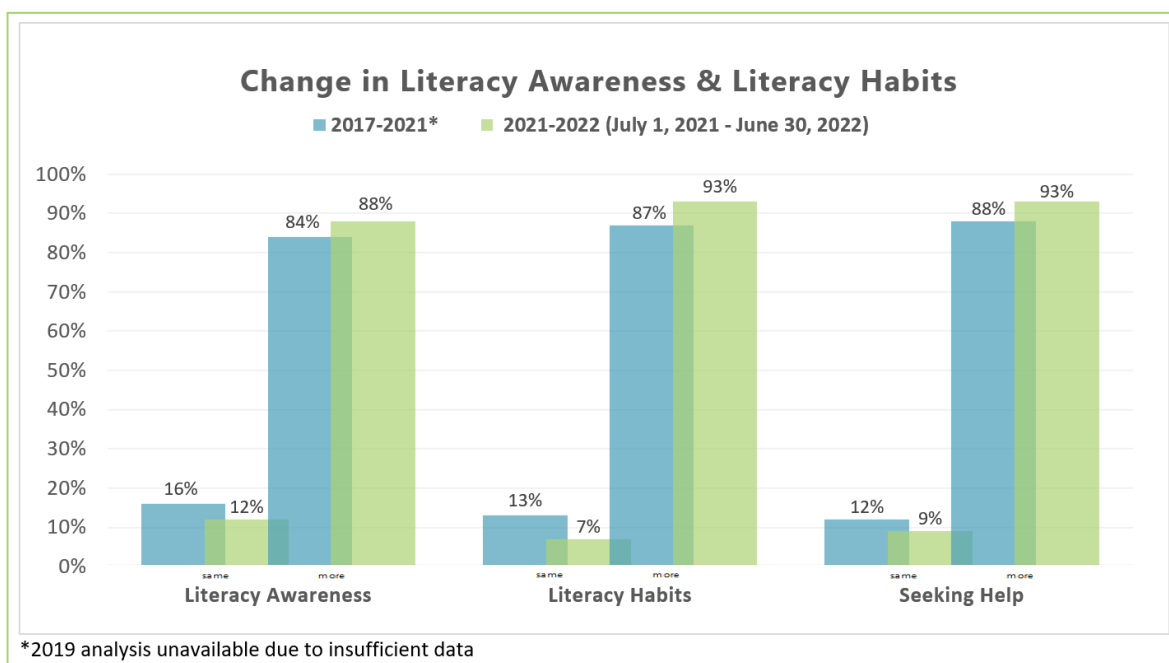
Strong Start’s model of developing and implementing highly impactful programs and its focus on evaluation ensures that all Strong Start programs are delivered with a high degree of efficacy. To help determine the impact and effectiveness of the Baby Connections program, participating families were asked to complete a **Parent Feedback and Evaluation Form** (survey) at the end of the program.

Data analysis for the 2021-2022 program year is based on the 182 submitted forms, indicating a 43% completion rate. The analysis of the responses showed that from the participants who provided a response:

**88% increased their literacy awareness** - They better understand **the impact they can have** on their baby’s healthy brain development and their development of language and literacy skills.

**93% changed their literacy habits after attending the program** - They **interact face-to-face** with their baby **more often** and **in more meaningful ways**. They spend more time each day **talking, singing and reading** with their baby.

**93% are more informed about where to seek help** – They are **more aware of developmental and language milestones** and **know where to reach out for help** if they have questions or concerns.



Research tells us that right from birth, positive opportunities, in the context of warm, caring relationships, contribute significantly to a child’s capacity to learn, both in school and later in life. The first year of a baby’s life has an enormous impact on the development of basic language and cognitive skills and lays the foundation for healthy child development and the development of language and literacy. Our consistent program results provide evidence that the *Baby Connections* program is effective in increasing parent/adult literacy awareness and engagement in meaningful interactions with their baby that promote brain development and the development of language and emergent literacy skills.

The feedback submitted by parents/caring adults every year, provides further evidence of the importance of the *Baby Connections* program to families. The feedback from the 2021-2022 program has been overwhelmingly positive, with everyone sharing the difference the program has made in how they interact with their babies. Parents/caring adults shared with us that they are reading, singing and playing with their babies more. Enriched bonding is occurring during these meaningful face-to-face interactions and parents/caring adults feel they know more about how to engage with their babies and help them learn. Here are several testimonials to illustrate the impact of this year's program:

*"The program had very good guidance. I got so much knowledge which helps me a lot."* – parent, excerpt from parent feedback & evaluation form

*"I recognized that literacy is not just reading to baby. It is how we talk with her throughout the day. I am spending more time labeling body parts and clothing during diaper changes. Labelling the food we are eating etc."* – parent, excerpt from parent feedback & evaluation form

*"The biggest change is to have books around within reach throughout the day, not just for bedtime reading."* – parent, excerpt from parent feedback & evaluation form

Participation in the program also helped parents/caring adults understand important milestones. It dispelled myths that may have existed around optimal times for learning, the importance of using First Language and the recommendation for screen time. Here is what some parents shared:

*I understand better the importance of reading to my baby and speech development. I'm watching my baby for cues and labelling, repetition and more imitation."* – **parent**, excerpt from parent feedback & evaluation form

*"I'm being more relaxed and allowing my baby to explore books in age appropriate manner, like chewing on the books."* – **parent**, excerpt from parent feedback & evaluation

*"We use less screen time with my baby. Reading to my baby and knowing my baby is learning to understand and is learning what I teach, I sing more too."* – **parent**, excerpt from parent feedback & evaluation form

The program also helped to bring families out of social isolation. The *Baby Connections* Facilitators invested their time and expertise in mentoring families on their literacy journey. This relationship between families and Facilitators was vital in creating positive literacy outcomes for our communities' youngest members. The parents/caring adults also had the opportunity to develop connections with other parents in the program. The feedback from parents/caring adults illustrates that these positive relationships provided important social connections:

*"I liked the most being able to safely get out of the house and meet with other moms and learn about baby connections."* – **parent**, excerpt from parent feedback & evaluation form

*"Finally being able to get together in person again and have face to face connection. The resources were absolutely amazing as well, and totally unexpected!"* – **parent**, excerpt from parent feedback & evaluation form

**\*A comprehensive version of this program report is available upon request.**