

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 2022-2023 program year, the *Baby Connections* program returned to a primarily in-person delivery. Only a few instances of *Baby Connections @ Home*™, the virtual adaptation of the program, were delivered the entire program year.



Parents and caring adults participated in the program with their babies and attended a minimum of four program sessions during which trained Facilitators delivered key messages, practical strategies and coaching about the importance of healthy brain development, 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.

- **844 participants**
- **847 babies received the *Baby Connections* Kit**
- **74 programs**
- **1 new Program Partner in a new Region**

The Participants

The *Baby Connections* program was delivered to 844 families and 847 babies received a complete *Baby Connections* kit to take home. (Three families with twins received a kit for each baby.) Overall, a total of 74 *Baby Connections* programs were delivered in the 2022-2023 program year.

Participants included babies between 6-12 months of age, parents, legal guardians, 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

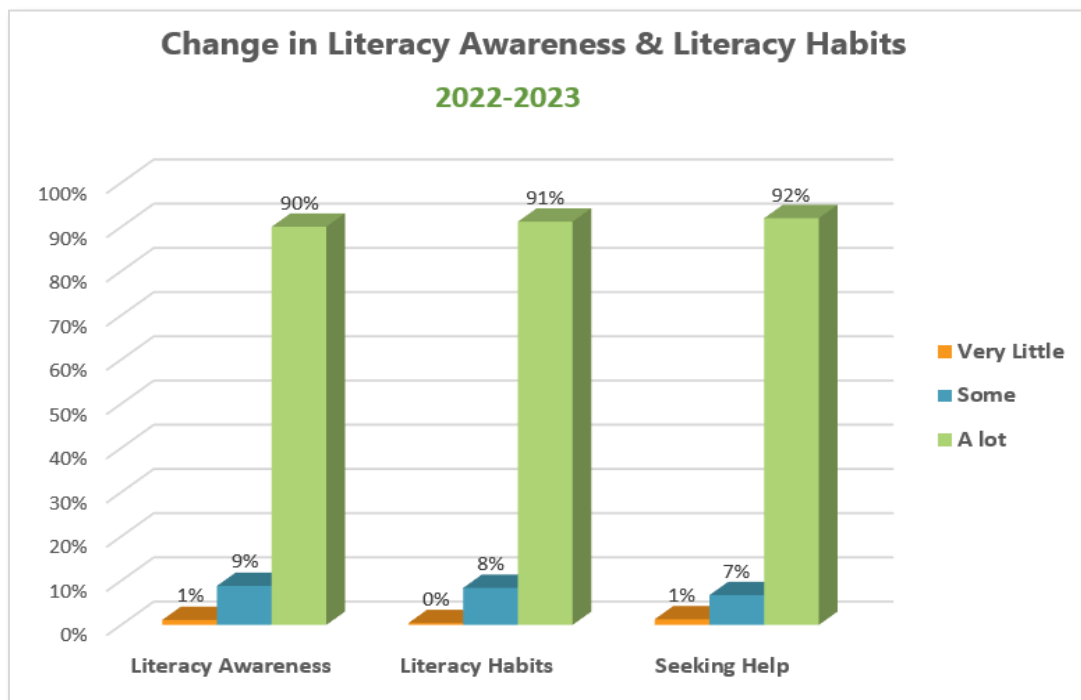
Strong Start’s model of developing and implementing highly impactful programs and its focus on evaluation ensures that all Strong Start programs are delivered with a high degree of efficacy. To help determine the impact and effectiveness of the *Baby Connections* program, participating families were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

Data analysis for the 2022-2023 program year is based on the 396 submitted forms, indicating a 45% completion rate. The analysis of the responses clearly shows the impact of the program.

97% of participants increased their literacy awareness, with 92% indicating they learned a lot in the program. They better understand the impact they can have on their baby’s healthy brain development and their development of language and literacy skills.

99% of participants changed their literacy habits after attending the program, with 91% indicating they made many changes. 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.

99% of participants feel they are more informed about where to seek help, with 92% indicating they learned a lot 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.



Additionally, **94% parents/caring adults indicated they use the materials from the *Baby Connections Kit* with their baby at least 1-2 times per week**, with 73% indicating they use them daily, multiple times per day,

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. Ensuring access to quality literacy materials at home while empowering parents/caring adults to feel confident in using them with their baby create the power the program.

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, which promotes 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 2022-2023 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:

"I am verbalizing more of what we do at home - talking a lot at home, spending more one-on-one time together with the baby. We read more books too." – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

"We are reading and singing more consistently. Making reading part of our nightly routine." – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

"We are now reading books in different ways together including daddy. Have lots of quality of time with our son." – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

"I am definitely paying more attention to our daily routine and making/creating more learning experiences from our everyday habits." – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

"I and my baby are more connected together. She feels relaxed and we more enjoyed together." – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

"We are going to the library more! Getting new books each week and reading in funny voices." – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

"I'm more intentional to listen pause and respond to my baby's babbling as though we are having an actual conversation rather than talking over him when he's making noise/communicating." – 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 thought my twins were too young to read before and didn’t give books cause I thought they would rip them. they love time we read together now.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

“I wasn’t reading yet. I had no books. Now we do it every day.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

“We’re leaving books around the home, with toys etc. not just on his bookshelf. Books aren’t just reserved for “reading” time anymore.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

“I’m talking more, not using TV for my children to learn.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

“I got lots of information about how babies learn and progress in their brain growth. And we got amazing books for free.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

The program also helped to bring families together. 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:

“What I liked the most about the program was the friendly environment + that I was able to come with my partner as a family activity.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

“I liked how informative, casual and approachable it was. I also enjoy the intimate play time that the babies get with one another and time with other moms to just chat.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

“I liked the connections with other parents and babies to learn together. I am not alone about not knowing stuff.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

“I liked best meeting new moms and babies. Building relationships and interacting with other babies.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

“I liked the sense of community, getting to meet other moms, and how the program was free which makes it more accessible to all members of the community.” – parent, excerpt from Parent Feedback & Evaluation form

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