

Building a Child Impact Assessment Tool for the City of Edmonton

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Citation: Yates, Bob. (2005). "Building a Child Impact Assessment Tool for the City of Edmonton." *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2): 371-377.
Retrieved [date] from <http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/>.

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Abstract

Few Canadian cities have taken their commitments to children and young people more seriously than the City of Edmonton. The City has recognized that the local government agency in Edmonton must take the lead in promoting the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (http://www.edmonton.ca/CityGov/buildingcapcity/safe_community.pdf). The firm of Yates, Thorn & Associates, a Victoria, British Columbia-based social planning consultancy, was hired by the City of Edmonton to help develop specific aspects of its Children's Services Framework. This report describes the development of a Child Impact Assessment Tool.

Keywords: [Child-friendly cities](#), [child impact assessment tool](#), [Canada](#)

Background

The demands on local governments in Canada and elsewhere to provide effective services for children and youth are increasing along many dimensions:

- The expectations of parents and others regarding the range and quality of services are expanding.
- More children are living in poverty now than at any time in the past. Their need for services is even greater than that of those children who have the ability to pay.
- Federal and provincial governments are downloading services onto local governments, and providing funding for new services such as childcare. At the same time, they frequently adopt legal (such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)) or promotional (such as Alberta's Promise) frameworks which local governments are required to follow.
- Multiple agencies are increasingly involved as partners in the delivery of services. This is positive, but also demanding of time and resources.
- The value of all services is constantly being evaluated and in some cases questioned by a tax-conscious public.
- Communities are focusing more on outputs than inputs. The question is no longer "how many hockey practices did you attend?" but rather "did you win the game?" or at the very least "how well did you play?"

When all this is put together with the inherent vulnerability and lack of political power of children and youth, it requires local governments to include frameworks and processes in their policy making that consistently and continually prompt the question, "What will be the impact on children and youth?"

The **City of Edmonton** recognized that this question must be addressed as part of the implementation of its Children's Services Framework. Consequently, the City of Edmonton Community Services Department requested Yates, Thorn & Associates¹ to develop a Child Impact Assessment Tool: a "lens" through which the impact of programs, policies and initiatives on children and youth could be examined.

Early discussion made it clear that the Child Impact Assessment process must be:

- Practical - it must be simple to use, providing a set of functional tools for city administrators and elected officials.
- Visible - it must act to reinforce the need for a broad range of services for children and youth.
- Visionary - it must be far-sighted in its vision of services for children, with the goal of putting Edmonton at the leading edge of child-friendly cities.

To meet these objectives, it must be designed to:

- Educate various groups about children's services. These groups include internal department and city staff, councilors, external agency staff and volunteers, as well as the general public.
- Advocate for a child-friendly Edmonton. This implies a more proactive approach focused not just on "means" but also on "ends."
- Integrate child-focused efforts into the business planning processes of the City. The Child Impact Assessment will only be effective in the long term if it is a part of the machinery of government.
- Focus on the key issues of importance to the children and youth of Edmonton, which had been identified through consultation with children and adults during the development of the Children's Services Framework.

Moving Edmonton towards Being a "Child Friendly City"

In 2000, the City's Community Services Department developed an Integrated Services Strategy.² This was a broad strategic long-range plan designed to guide the Department's work over a ten-year period. Its main themes flowed from the City's long range municipal development plan. For the last four years, it has provided a cohesive framework for the development and delivery of integrated services in the areas of parkland, recreation, and neighborhood social services.

The adoption of this strategy positioned the department to be responsive and creative. It advocated for stronger decision-making roles for citizens, seamless service delivery, and a stronger focus targeting defined areas of need, which included children and young people.

The Integrated Services Strategy states:

The people of Edmonton believe in certain principles and values. The following values should guide all plans and activities of the department. Such values will form a foundation for an integrated service strategy that will successfully meet the needs of Edmontonians. Communities working together can effect positive change for a better future. This idea is core to our service strategy. Edmontonians' shared values and priorities help build a framework for value-driven policy and programming. By working together with communities, we can put these values into action.

It was built around a set of seven community values:

- Personal and community safety – feeling secure at home, on the streets and in the neighborhood.
- Human dignity – being treated with respect and compassion.
- Personal wellness and health – living a better, longer life.

- Environmental integrity – designing with nature and ensuring sustainability of the physical environment.
- Social justice – the right of all to participate in life.
- An attractive city – being a showcase for civic pride.
- Quality experiences – having enjoyable and worthwhile events, activities and learning.

These community values are central to the Child Impact Assessment process since they are the best description of the world that Edmontonians want for children. Each program, service and facility is designed to re-align reality toward this vision. The question the Child Impact Assessment must ask, therefore, is how well this is being done. The task of the Assessment is to assist the Community Services Department staff and other policy developers to do it better.

Children and youth were recognized in the Integrated Services Strategy as one demographic group that should be a high priority in the Community Services Department's workplan. The Department began work in 2003 to create a Children's Services Framework. It began by asking the question, "What does Edmonton want for its children?" The Department's aim was to position itself, and through it, the City of Edmonton, as a "Child Friendly City."

The Children's Services Framework proposed six far-reaching goals:

- **Advocating for children** moved the Department from playing a passive role as the deliverer of services to children, to becoming an active advocate for children and their rights. The steps needed to implement this goal were the creation of an advocacy action plan, a framework for promoting children's participation so that they could be their own advocates, and a public awareness campaign to ensure that children's issues remained in the public eye.
- **Aligning programs, services and facilities to children's needs** was an explicit recognition that sometimes this alignment is lacking. The strategy for implementing this goal was to develop a Child Impact Assessment Tool that could be used to assess existing and proposed policies and initiatives to ensure that they are focused on the needs of children and youth.
- A range of strategies and actions were proposed for **eliminating accessibility barriers**. This will include working outside the department with other agencies such as the City's Transportation and Human Resource departments.
- **Supporting families** to ensure that the rapidly changing and expanding childcare delivery system meets the diverse needs and situations of children and their families. It will also involve "celebrating the role of the family," and the promotion of play through citywide participation in International Play Day.

- **Enabling children to become contributing citizens** will be articulated in a Contributing Citizen Action Plan. This will be a cutting-edge initiative designed to identify the many ways in which children can learn about and practice the skills of citizenship.

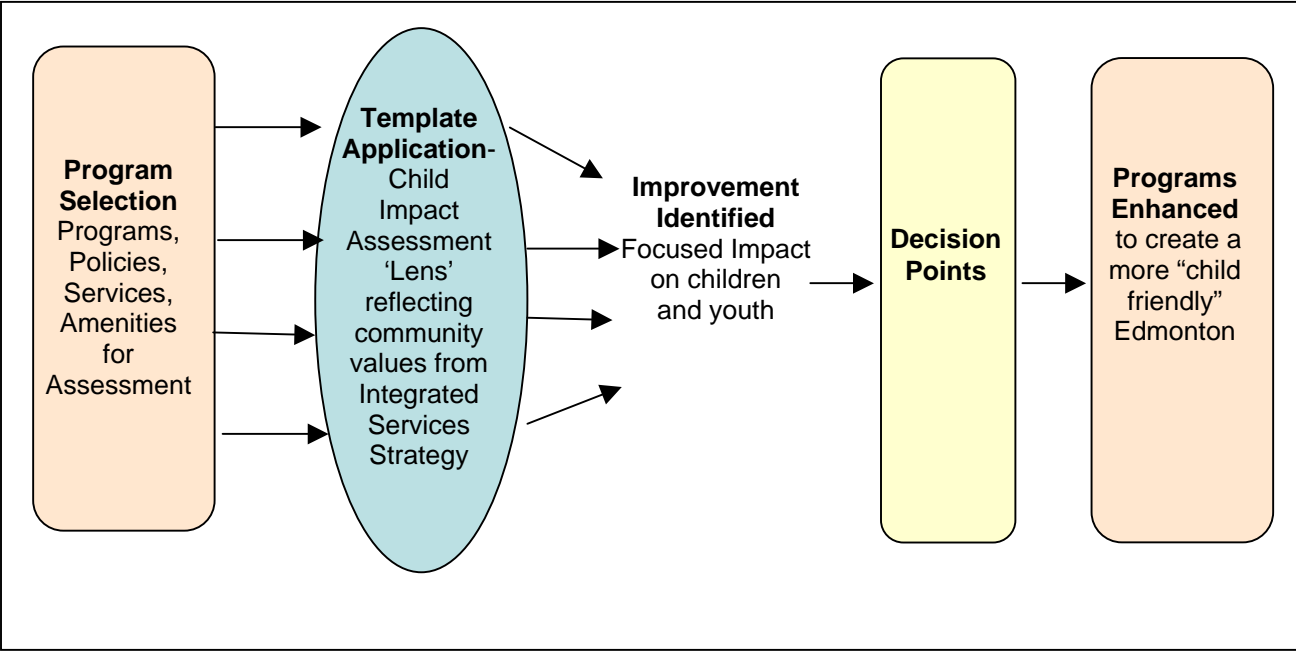
Child Impact Assessment Tool

Yates, Thorn & Associates have provided consulting assistance to the City's Community Services Department to develop the Child Impact Assessment Tool.

The concept of the Child Impact Assessment Tool is part of the **Nine Building Blocks** that the Child Friendly Cities Secretariat has proposed as essential elements of a child-friendly city, defined as "a local system of good governance committed to fulfilling children's rights."

There were three steps in the development of the Child Impact Assessment Tool. The first step was the conceptualization of the overall Child Impact Assessment Tool and how it would be used. This is shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Assessment Process



The use of the tool in conceptual terms involves:

- Program Selection - Certain departmental programs, policies, services and amenities will be selected for assessment. Eventually a set of selection criteria will be developed, but for the pilot process (during 2005/6), the

selection has been made to gain maximum learning from minimum additional workload on city staff.

- **Template Application** - Program staff will use a standard form/template to comment on the impact of the program on children and youth. This will be a collaborative process involving individual rating, group discussion and facilitated mediation.
- **Improvements Identified** - Based on this assessment, a number of program improvements will be identified.
- **Decision Points** - Decisions can then be made regarding if and how changes can be made to the program.
- **Programs Enhanced** - The outcome of the process will be a more child-friendly program, and eventually all these decisions, when taken together, will create a more child-friendly Edmonton.

The second step in the process of developing the tool was to interpret how the community values from the Integrated Services Strategy applied to or would be understood by Edmonton's children. This involved comparing the values to frameworks developed specifically with children in mind: the **UNCRC**, **UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities**, **Alberta's Promise** and various bibliographic sources including the results of the **Growing Up in Cities research project**. The community values were then restated, focusing on children and young people.

The third step was to develop a form or template that could be easily used by staff to conduct the assessment.

Eventually City Council intends that other City departments and other agencies in the city will use this "lens," and they have renamed the overall initiative "Child Friendly Edmonton." It is hoped by both Council and the Community Services Department that being "child-friendly" will gradually become even more part of the Edmonton mindset than it is today. It is Council's belief that a city that is good for children is a city that is good for everyone.

Current Situation

Work has begun on piloting the Child Impact Assessment Tool. City Council support has been obtained, and a 2005/6 budget line for the overall Child Friendly Edmonton initiative has been established. A number of projects have been identified where the process will be tested during Fall of 2005. These reviews will cover the full range of departmental services, with at least one project in each of the department's five branches:

- A planned facility renovation
- A park management plan

- A community grant program
- A review of fees for services
- A review of the Community Services department's Performance Management System and Business Planning Process development
- Two children's summer programs

In terms of the bigger picture, the Children's Services Framework went to Council in February 2005 and was well received—so well received, indeed, that Council directed that “the City Manager prepare a report for the Community Services Committee on a strategy to integrate children's services across City Departments and Agencies.” The City Manager's report was approved in June 2005. The workplan of the Community Services Department will move in two directions in 2005/6. First, work will continue to develop the Children's Services Framework within the department. This will involve developing a Communication Plan, piloting the Child Impact Assessment Tool, and examining accessibility barriers. Second, it will involve developing the cross-departmental strategy that Council has requested. There will be busy times ahead as the City of Edmonton moves to become more child- and youth-friendly.

Endnotes

1. For further information on Yates, Thorn & Associates and its principal Bob Yates, please email bob@yatesthorn.com and visit their website (www.yatesthorn.com).
2. Most of the main documents to which this article refers can be found on the website of the City of Edmonton at www.edmonton.ca. The document originally entitled Children's Services Framework has been re-titled Child Friendly Edmonton.

***Bob Yates** is an urban planner who has worked in British Columbia for almost 30 years. He was on staff with the Vancouver and Greater Victoria School Districts, and was a manager with the BC provincial government's Recreation and Sport Branch. He has spent the last 15 years working as a consultant in Yates, Thorn & Associates. This firm undertakes a variety of projects, including educational and facility planning for school districts, recreation planning for municipalities, and program and policy planning on issues that often involve children and youth. Bob Yates has worked with the Society for Children and Youth of BC managing the Society's Child and Youth Friendly Communities Initiative. He is the primary author of its materials.*