


SOUTH OKANAGAN/SIMILKAMEEN COMMUNITY LED COLLABORATION PROJECT

FINAL REPORT



*We acknowledge from time immemorial,
the Syilx Okanagan people cared for
and stewarded this land until the arrival
of colonialism that divided their
territory and separated them from their
traditional way of life.*

*We respectfully recognize that we are
privileged to carry out this work on the
traditional and unceded territory of the
Syilx Okanagan Nation.*

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Project background

In October 2021, the British Columbia (BC) government announced a new service delivery framework for Children and Youth with Support Needs (CYSN). However, in 2022, the rollout of this framework was paused to allow for broader and deeper community engagement. In response, Inclusion BC, the BC Association for Child Development and Intervention, the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres, and the Federation of Community Social Services of BC collaborated on a proposal to the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) to conduct a provincial engagement. This engagement aims to gather insights on necessary changes to better support children and youth in BC.

The funding received for this initiative supports the “Community-Led Collaboration Project,” which is guided by four key principles:

1. Community-Driven Change
2. Collaboration
3. Reconciliation & Decolonizing
4. Transparency & Timeliness

Phases of Engagement

- Phase 1: Five communities conducted engagement projects.
- Phase 2: Up to 30 communities are participating in their own community-led engagements.

Outcomes and Future Directions

The results from both phases will inform a comprehensive report to be submitted to the MCFD. This report is expected to shape the future of services for children and youth with support needs in BC.

The South Okanagan/Similkameen Community-Led Collaboration Project was steered by OneSky Community Resources and occurred between June 2024 and October 2024.



Our approach to inviting dialogue

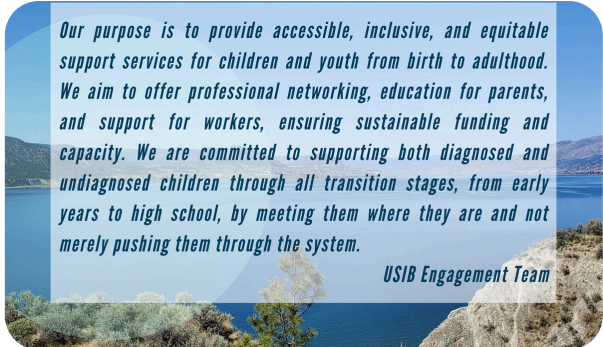
Our goal was to gather as much qualitative evidence as possible in multiple ways from as many caregivers, youth and service providers as possible within our target area. Our methods of collection included in person engagement sessions, an online survey, telephone interviews, and completion of the questions one on one in person.

We initially separated our larger area into engagement teams based on School Districts (SD67 Okanagan-Skaha and SD53 Okanagan-Similkameen) as a way to honour the unique differences, challenges and opportunities that lay in each smaller community. We connected with existing partners within the Penticton Indian Band, Osoyoos Indian Band, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, Upper Similkameen Indian Band and the Nqsil Early Years program. We invited representatives to join our engagement teams and welcomed an invitation to hold a separate engagement from the Upper Similkameen Indian Band community to engage directly with staff onsite in Hedley. These three initial engagement team sessions gave us good insight into how to best approach this work in each community. Service providers present were eager to share their experience and contribute to creating our norms for engagement and our key purpose statements.



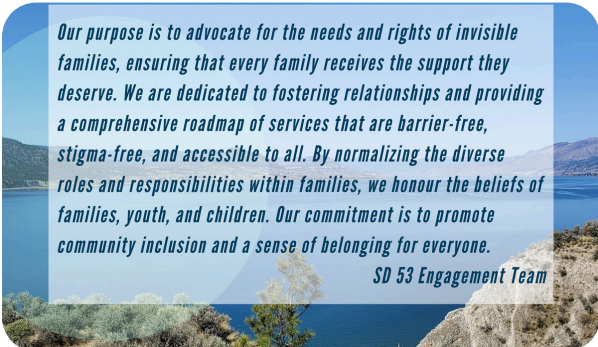
Our project aims to create an inclusive, supportive, and culturally sensitive environment for families with children with support needs. By removing barriers, filling service gaps, and listening to families' voices, we empower caregivers and enhance the well-being of their children. We are committed to fostering a community where every child can thrive, and every family feels heard and supported.

SD 67 Engagement Team



Our purpose is to provide accessible, inclusive, and equitable support services for children and youth from birth to adulthood. We aim to offer professional networking, education for parents, and support for workers, ensuring sustainable funding and capacity. We are committed to supporting both diagnosed and undiagnosed children through all transition stages, from early years to high school, by meeting them where they are and not merely pushing them through the system.

USIB Engagement Team



Our purpose is to advocate for the needs and rights of invisible families, ensuring that every family receives the support they deserve. We are dedicated to fostering relationships and providing a comprehensive roadmap of services that are barrier-free, stigma-free, and accessible to all. By normalizing the diverse roles and responsibilities within families, we honour the beliefs of families, youth, and children. Our commitment is to promote community inclusion and a sense of belonging for everyone.

SD 53 Engagement Team

From this, we created and opened an online survey opportunity for all communities to have the opportunity to share their voices and inform the process. We had a good uptake on the online survey with approximately 50 respondents, the majority being caregivers of children and youth with support needs.

In our next phase, we began planning family engagement sessions. With the help of our community engagement leads, we planned events where protocol for safe spaces was embedded. We offered dinner, reimbursements for childcare and transportation, and grocery gift cards for those attending to honour their time. Community partner leads like School District leads and Dragonfly Pond staff attended to help in supporting families in the engagement process and offer a familiar and welcoming face for participants. We set up several means of sharing their lived experience including, one on one chats, writing down answers in cafe style engagement and an art station, to help support those that wanted to express their needs or share their story in an alternate way. We put in place a plan for participants who may need some time to debrief. As we set about offering in person engagement sessions for families, it was evident that it is a struggle for families to participate in these types of events. We found ourselves looking at other ways to meaningfully capture their experience while also meeting their needs and began a telephone interview phase in which we offered those who participated a grocery gift card for engaging in a one-on-one phone interview.

About the South Okanagan / Similkameen

The Syilx Okanagan People's territory features a diverse and stunning landscape, including deserts, lakes, alpine forests, and endangered grasslands. It spans roughly 69,000 square kilometers. (Okanagan Nation Alliance 2017)

The South Okanagan Similkameen district consists of six municipalities including Penticton, Summerland, Osoyoos, Oliver, Princeton and Keremeos. The Okanagan Similkameen Regional District is in southern British Columbia adjacent to the U.S. state of Washington . The population in this region is 90,178 according to the 2021 Census of Population conducted by Statistics Canada. (Wikipedia, 2023)

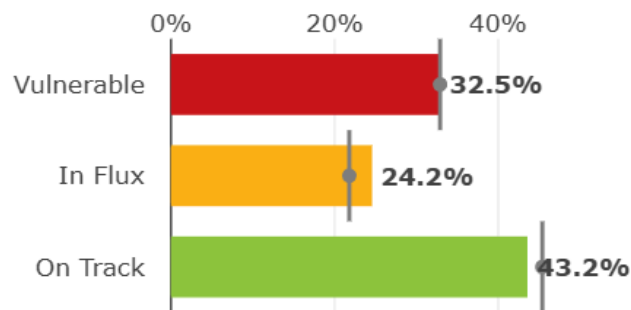
“The Regional District is bounded by Manning Park to the west, Peachland to the north, Anarchist Mountain to the east and the United States border to the south. The Regional District has an area of 10,400 km², constituting 1.2% of the province's area.”
(RDOS 2024)

School District 67 - Okanagan-Skaha includes Penticton Summerland, Naramata, Kaleden, and Penticton Indian Band. It is located between Okanagan Lake and Skaha Lake and offers year-round recreational activities thanks to its hot summers and dry winters. The Okanagan region is famous for its orchards, producing cherries, apples, peaches, and more.

School District 53 - Okanagan-Similkameen includes Oliver, Osoyoos, Keremeos, Cawston, Hedley, Okanagan Falls, Osoyoos Indian Band, Upper Similkameen Indian Band, and Lower Similkameen Indian Band. It is a rural area surrounded by natural beauty and has small, picturesque, and culturally diverse communities with mild winters and hot summers. The landscape and climate provide many outdoor activities. It offers quiet community living close to urban centers.

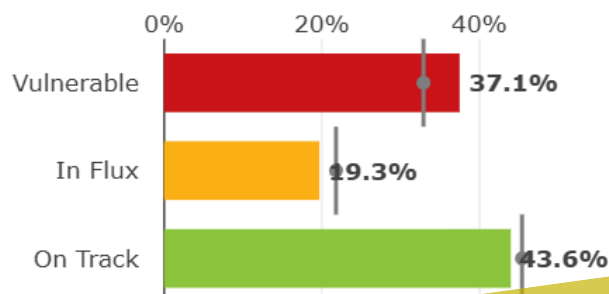
According to the Early Development Instrument (EDI), 32.5% or 207 kindergarten children in School District 67, were vulnerable on one or more scales of the EDI in Wave 8. The EDI research in School District 67 indicates that the social and emotional needs of children in kindergarten are higher than their needs in other areas of development, such as physical well-being, language, and communication. (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2024)

OUTCOMES SUMMARY

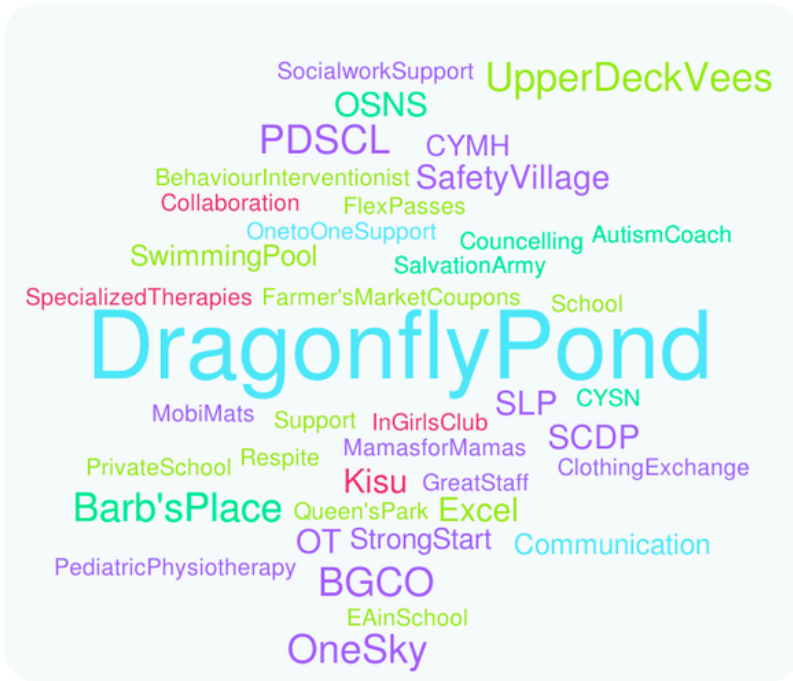


In School District 53, the EDI showed 37.1% or 102 Kindergarten children were vulnerable in one of more scales of the EDI in Wave 8. (HELP). The EDI research in School District 53 also indicates that the social and emotional needs of children in kindergarten are higher than their needs in other areas of development, such as physical well-being, language, and communication. (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2024)

OUTCOMES SUMMARY



What we heard

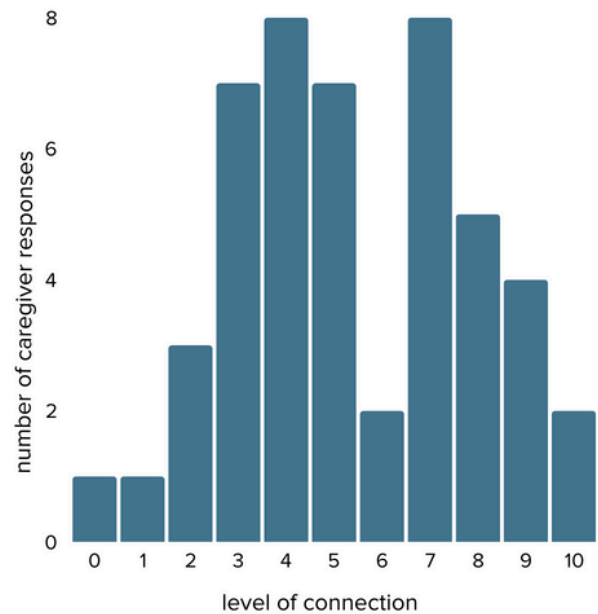


“Thinking about services and supports for children and youth with support needs, What is working well in your community?”

When respondents were asked the above question, many community programs were mentioned along with many heartfelt comments full of gratitude for the service providers working within the programs. This highlighted much of the amazing work being done to hold up families in community. We noted that the most frequently referred to program was Dragonfly Pond Family Society.

On a scale of 0-10, do you feel connected to services in your community?

When asked if they felt connected to services within their community, many indicated some level of connection, with most responding between 3 and 7 on a scale of 0-10.



What we heard

Conversation Themes	Supporting Details
<p>Accessibility</p> <p><i>“There are waitlists that can take months to get in to see somebody, then we as parents get burned out because we don’t know what to do or how to help our child.”</i></p> <p><i>~ Survey response</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waitlists for therapies, child care and school age support in programs / classrooms, Child and Youth Mental Health, and developmental screening are long and create barriers to accessing services in a timely manner for families. Further, delay in receiving specialized services can hinder children’s progress and leave parents feeling unsupported during critical developmental windows. • Rural respondents shared frustration with having to always travel to services and supports instead of having them available in community. The cost and capacity needed to do this is overwhelming and burdensome for families. • Rural areas are all unique and have their own context, within the South Okanagan Similkameen areas, each community has its’ own needs that differ from neighbouring communities. Families and service providers expressed the importance of having awareness of this in context to any services and supports being offered. • The issue of accessibility to summer camps has been highlighted multiple times. Many people emphasized the importance of inclusive participation in these programs. However, the high costs (sometimes exceeding \$6000), the lack of support in unlicensed programs, and the shortage of trained staff to assist children with different abilities pose significant challenges for families trying to access these opportunities. • Families have reported that their children are unable to attend school or child care full-time due to their diverse needs, the shortage of support staff, and the reluctance of programs to be fully inclusive. • It was shared that more families are moving towards choosing private therapies, screening options and schools to better meet their child/ren’s needs, resulting in less funding available for other needs and causing more financial strain for families. • In Indigenous communities specifically, it was shared that it is better when funding is provided directly to the band to allow for autonomy over how services are brought into their community.

Conversation Themes	Supporting Details
<p>Inclusion in Community</p> <p><i>“Not a lot of understanding or support, it sucks. We want to partake and be a part of our community too. He misses out on things that other kids get to do.”</i> ~ Survey response</p> <p><i>“Even if you can’t accommodate, you can at least be kind”</i> ~ Survey response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents shared a consistent message of feeling frustration and disconnect within their community reporting that most community events and activities do not fully consider how to best include participation from those who have challenges such as a disability or may become sensorially overloaded while attending. Examples cited included community events such as children's and community festivals, sports events, and restaurants/businesses. The exception was reference made multiple times to the South Okanagan Events Centre creating sensory packs to give out to children who needed them while attending hockey games. • Caregivers and service providers shared the need for public education around reducing stigmas and including people of all abilities. There was also mention of a greater need for more social-emotional / empathy learning opportunities for children.
<p>Navigating Systems</p> <p><i>“I have become my own case manager for my child”</i> ~ Survey response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The desire to create a ‘road map’ for families was expressed in every team engagement session. It was clear that service providers not only understood the struggle families have with knowing where to begin and how to proceed at each stage in the process of navigating services, but that they too felt unclear about all the services available and how to access them. • Currently, families feel like there is too much ownership placed on them to reach out for help, causing a feeling of overwhelm with ‘one more thing...’ • In an ideal system, families of children with any diagnosis would have a navigator to help them seamlessly access their local services.

<p>Conversation Themes</p>	<p>Supporting Details</p>
<p>Navigating Systems continued</p> <p><i>“My experience of the social worker - if you don't keep calling me, I won't know you need me”</i> ~ Survey response</p> <p><i>“In a perfect system, there would be supports that grow with my child and transitions as he ages”</i> ~ Survey response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families shared that they need more information from service providers about their options for services and support. • Service providers shared a desire to have streamlined support and to remove barriers for families.
<p>Gaps</p> <p><i>“All of the Autism Funding Unit money goes to pay for my child's private school, so we have no funds left for counselling or other needs.”</i> ~ Survey response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a consensus that sports and activities in communities for children of all abilities are lacking. • Many parents and service providers suggested that, ideally, funding like Autism Funding would be for all diagnoses a child/ren may receive. • A sense that services for children between the ages of 6-12 years are lacking in community came out in many areas of the survey. Families feel well connected in the early years reporting programming found through Dragonfly Pond, OneSky, OSNS, YMCA and other Early Years programs are helpful to them. Additionally, PDSCL was mentioned as being supportive in the teen years. • Caregivers of teenaged children shared they see a lack of programs that meet the needs/interests of their child/ren and expressed that programs that included more typical teen interests and life skills would be valuable to them. • Respondents shared an interest in having Autism BC visit rural communities regularly to help with access to information and support.

<p>Conversation Themes</p>	<p>Supporting Details</p>
<p>Gaps - Continued</p> <p><i>“They don’t have an opportunity to be active in recreational activities that allow them to socialize with others like themselves, sports specifically. We all know how important exercise is for these kiddos. And without these opportunities, they often have the tendency to become sedentary.”</i></p> <p><i>~ Survey response</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caregivers reported a need for wrap around mental health services for their families. The need for debrief services for caregivers and siblings is a large part of how families are best supported. Families shared that the cost for these services is often a barrier for them. Caregivers also expressed a need for peer groups with other caregivers of children with support needs who “get what I am going through”. • The difficulty in recruiting and retaining well-trained and qualified staff came up in conversations around service gaps in all forms of engagement. • Caregivers and service providers reported a lack of respite services available in community, and stressed the importance of maintaining this essential part of health and wellness for the whole family unit.
<p>Cultural Considerations</p> <p><i>“We need application processes that are culturally appropriate and also factor in parental capacity”</i></p> <p><i>~Service provider quote</i></p> <p><i>“Our communities need better support, we are running in survival mode”</i></p> <p><i>~Service provider quote</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In service provider engagements, our Indigenous community partners shared the importance of using safe/non triggering language when working with families. • Children may miss large periods of time in school for many reasons (i.e.: cultural events, loss in community, etc.) It was shared that decolonizing and indigenizing curriculum requires that these cultural factors must be honored, respected, and taken into consideration. • It was shared that services need to be more aware of Indigenous ways of being when engaging with Indigenous families both on reserve and off and additionally, ways to decolonize their practices and approaches. They shared a feeling that cultural considerations are still lacking in all systems and stated the work of TRC is not showing up for those living in these communities. • A big topic of discussion centered around ensuring that service providers and government are providing materials in multiple languages.

Conversation Themes	Supporting Details
<p>Service Providers</p> <p><i>“More collaboration between community services! There is a disconnect currently.”</i> <i>~ Family engagement session response</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth workers in rural communities shared that they often work in isolation and feel there is a lack of training opportunities and networking to help support them in their unique positions. • Service providers reported feeling disconnected from each other in their work, despite knowing that we support families best when we work in collaboration. They shared not having enough time, and opportunity to learn about and connect with other providers. • Service providers shared a general consensus that there is a great need for specialized training in all diagnoses for front line staff.

Solutions

During the engagement sessions, online and in person, we explored what ideal services could look like in the unique communities and from that pulled solutions that were offered within the qualitative data received.

What is the opportunity for change and / or challenge facing communities?	Description of the opportunity for change/challenge	What is the solution that will address this opportunity or challenge?	Who are the key players?
<p>Isolation and access in rural communities</p> <p><i>“ There are real challenges for our rural families in terms of transportation, stable internet, etc. when accessing support.”</i> <i>~SD53 service provider</i></p>	<p>Families and service providers shared that there is a lack of services in rural communities and further a lack of funding for travel</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.A model in which services come to the smaller communities as opposed to families traveling for services. 2.Having a hub in smaller communities where families can access a multitude of services in one place (that are not necessarily under one umbrella) 	<p>Community service providers</p> <p>School Districts</p> <p>Provincial funding and support</p> <p>Municipality support</p>

What is the opportunity for change and / or challenge facing our communities?	Description of the opportunity for change/challenge	What is the solution that will address this opportunity or challenge?	Who are the key players?
<p>A need for more quality inclusive extra-curricular activities led by people trained in providing services for children of all abilities</p> <p><i>“My son is dying to play soccer but he’s too big to play with toddlers but does not meet the developmental level physically or intellectually to play with other 8 year olds. It would be amazing if these kids could have a space to play together.”</i> ~Survey response</p>	<p>While there are some quality services occurring (for example Upper Deck Vees, KISU Swimming, community centre programming) families reported wanting/needing more opportunities that allow for drop off and that are of interest to their child/ren. Dragonfly Pond was held up as an outstanding example of how inclusive services in community can be led.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide incentives and training opportunities to sports organizations and municipalities to support more opportunities for inclusive programs. (Note: Families specifically listed gymnastics, dance, baseball, soccer and low-cost camp, as areas of interest for their child.) 2. Resources or funding for more teen programming that is inclusive and reflects their interests. (Note: Families identified things like woodworking, hair and makeup, creating video reels, etc.) 	<p>Community service providers</p> <p>School Districts</p> <p>Provincial funding and support</p> <p>Municipality support</p> <p>CYSN</p>
<p>Accessibility</p> <p><i>“Families are doing their best to support each other with very limited resources.”</i> ~Survey response</p>	<p>The need for programming in hours that work for families outside of traditional times.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide service flexibility to meet the emergent needs of individual families i.e.: evenings / weekends. 	<p>Provincial funding and support</p>

What is the opportunity for change and /or challenge facing our communities?	Description of the opportunity for change/challenge	What is the solution that will address this opportunity or challenge	Who are the key players
Accessibility continued	<p>Stable funding for all diagnoses and smoother transitions for families at all stages.</p> <p>Culturally accessible processes for families.</p>	<p>2. Consistency across systems and services needs to be achieved to create smoother transitions for children and their caregivers throughout the lifespan.</p> <p>3. Creating a comprehensive guide to local, regional and national services that caregivers and service providers can access easily. It would ideally include cultural considerations and be available in multiple languages.</p>	<p>Community service providers</p> <p>CYSN</p> <p>School Districts</p>
Waitlists - including specialized therapies, childcare, support in the early years and school age, development screening and mental health services	<p>All service providers/therapies noted a lack of staff leading to longer waitlists impacting family's ability to access said services in a timely way.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Incentives to work in rural communities 2. Funded training spaces in post-secondary institutions 3. Providing child care centres with quality foundational opportunities in training around inclusive child care supports 	<p>Provincial funding and support</p> <p>Municipality support</p> <p>Post Secondary Institutions</p>

What is the opportunity for change and / or challenge facing our communities?	Description of the opportunity for change/challenge	What is the solution that will address this opportunity or challenge?	Who are the key players?
<p>Service providers working in partnerships</p>	<p>The need for stable funding for all diagnoses and smoother transitions for families at all stages was repeatedly reported in all forms of data collection. Additionally, the importance of having opportunity to network with and learn from and about others in different roles was apparent.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Creating a community of practice for all service providers of children aged 0-19 that provides opportunity to gather bi-annually or quarterly to network and share essential information. 2. Database of services that service providers / organizations can access with filters for easy searching that are updated and maintained to be current. 	<p>Provincial support</p> <p>Community service providers</p> <p>Municipal support</p>
<p>Confusion around navigating services and support.</p> <p><i>"I'm worried about what will happen as he transitions into adulthood."</i> ~ Survey response</p>	<p>Caregivers and service providers shared confusion over how and where to access services, and expressed a desire for a streamlined way to learn about all that is available for families to access.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide regular occurring information sessions for families about navigating services. 2. Create and provide educational opportunities for families around topics such as technology, healthy habits, how to play, advocating for their child, and how can youth begin advocating for themselves. 3. Provincial program visits to community (ie: Autism BC) 	<p>CYSN</p> <p>Provincial support and funding</p> <p>Community service providers</p>

What is the opportunity for change and / or challenge facing our communities?	Description of the opportunity for change/challenge	What is the solution that will address this opportunity or challenge?	Who are the key players?
<p>Families feeling unsupported after diagnosis.</p> <p><i>"I actually am very unaware of what is aware [sic]. I have a 15 year old with disabilities, so maybe it's because of his age."</i> ~Survey response</p> <p><i>"We need more caregiver support, financial support, very isolating, lonely and upsetting. A support group run by social worker or therapist. Subsidized counseling for families specific to special needs. Someone to guide parents to what's available. Someone to check in."</i> ~ Survey response</p>	<p>Families repeatedly shared that after they received diagnoses, they were at a loss. Families shared that they were unsure of which avenues to follow and in what order.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Creating a visual and easily accessible road map for families around navigating services. 2. Database of services that service providers / organizations can access with filters for easy searching that are updated and maintained to be current. 3. Having navigators for every family, regardless of diagnoses to help guide them through services continuously from the time of diagnosis to 19 years of age (seamless care) 4. New diagnosis parent support sessions with a mentor, navigator and service providers present so that caregivers will know and see where to go. 5. Provide parent and family support networks that consist of local support and/or family centered workshops that could provide valuable guidance, support, shared experience and emotional support. 	<p>Provincial funding and support</p> <p>Community service providers</p> <p>CYSN</p>

Summary

It was evident to us in our community conversations that there are many passionate, dedicated and caring individuals working to support and uphold the rights of children in our communities and to help them grow, develop and be supported in many beneficial ways. Much intention and empathy was placed into each comment that was shared and the feeling of that was palpable in face-to-face conversations. It is evident that service providers are stretched thin, with a lack of staffing and resources to accomplish all that they hope to. The gap appears to be in how we come together as a whole to wrap around and support in a larger way, alleviating or lessening the burden on families to navigate the pieces while also caring for and nurturing their child. It was noted many times during in-person, online and telephone conversations that families are struggling with mental health and we would be remiss if we did not highlight the impact this is having for all involved. It was suggested over and over that a huge impact would be found in providing support, be it more debrief opportunities for families, professionally supported peer caregiver groups, or subsidized services directly for counseling/debrief services that support all members of the family.

Reference List

Syilx Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2017, <https://syilx.org/>

Human Early Learning Partnership. (2024). EDi Data Dashboard. <https://dashboard.earlylearning.ubc.ca>

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The Community-Led Collaboration Project team would like to deeply thank all of the families, caregivers, youth, and service providers who participated for sharing your time, ideas, experiences, concerns and hopes with us. Your words will make a difference as the South Okanagan/Similkameen areas look to best support children and youth with disabilities or support needs so they can thrive now and into the future. Your voices matter greatly and we hope we represented them accurately with honour, dignity and respect.



OneSky Community Resources would like to acknowledge and thank our community partners who played a role in shaping this process by advising on the Engagement Team Lead tables:

- Dragonfly Pond
- WordPlay Therapy Services
- Upper Similkameen Indian Band
- Lower Similkameen Indian Band
- Okanagan Similkameen Neurological Society
- Lower Similkameen Community Social Services
- SD67 Okanagan-Skaha
- SD53 Okanagan-Similkameen
- Penticton Indian Band
- Osoyoos Indian Band
- Nqsilt Early Years Program
- Dessert Sun Society
- BGCO
- Oooknakane Friendship Centre

Together we are better