

BULLETIN

## Champion for children

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INFANT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM SUPERVISOR MICHAELA WOOLDRIDGE'S JOB JUST GOT HARDER

**AFTER 20 YEARS** working in infant development, first as a Consultant dealing directly with families and then as a Clinical Supervisor, Michaela Wooldridge knows her field very well. She knows what constitutes best practices, and how these have evolved, and keep evolving, over the years. She knows about the studies that show, overwhelmingly, how effective early intervention is for developmentally challenged children. And she knows, perhaps best of all, how families need and value the supportive, personalized services her program provides.

As a result, Wooldridge also knows how detrimental recent funding cuts to the Provincial Infant Development Program (IDP) are likely to be.

In September, the Ministry for Children and Family Development abruptly cut off funding to the IDP provincial office. This leaves the 53 IDPs throughout BC in the very challenging position of maintaining professional standards without the leadership and the many services provided by the provincial office.

-My job just got a lot harder," says Wooldridge, who shares the supervisor position at the Peace Arch Infant Development Program, which services White Rock, Delta and Surrey. -And that will filter down to families."

The Provincial Office maintains and updates the provincial manual of practice which sets out standards for the programs, it provides training twice-yearly, houses a library, and maintains a website for clients and staff. - They are always keeping us up to date as the science changes. And they provide opportunities for us all to get together from across the province twice a year. The peer support is so valuable. And that will be gone. Its a huge loss," says Wooldridge.

Wooldridge cites the example of Alberta as proof that cutting the Provincial Office is shortsighted. -Ten years ago they dismantled their provincial structure and went to a regional structure. Within a couple of years they had lost 50% of their Infant Development Programs, so now, 10 years later, they are rebuilding a provincial structure."

**IDP CONSULTANTS** work in the homes of families with developmentally delayed babies, providing a wide range of support aimed at helping families provide a loving and developmentally encouraging environment for their children.

Working in the home has huge advantages, says Wooldridge. -We are going into what we know is the child's first and most important context. We directly influence child development by supporting and enriching the context in which they are raised.

-Our approach is unique in that it is relationship-based. In other words, we are partners with parents, recognizing that they are the experts on their children." Parents are the greatest influence on children, she points out. -What they do on a day-to-day basis is the most important thing."

The first step for an IDP Consultant going into home is a thorough assessment, involving the parents as much as possible. After that, the services will vary according to the type and severity of developmental delay and the specific needs and priorities of the family.

-We may be providing modifications to daily routines; for instance, if the child is slow to develop motor functions such as crawling, sitting or walking, we'll give ways to work with the child directly or to adapt the environment. We'll provide motivational toys to encourage the child to become mobile, develop balance or negotiate the environment ... for instance, not run into walls.

-When there are lots of other professionals involved, we help the parents manage that. We can guide them through the medical system, get them referrals to diagnostic processes, and access therapies. We'll help them find the services they really need, not just what seems to be available.

-There are also children with severe disabilities, where all the information says this child is not going to progress very far. So we have to help them deal with grief and loss. A lot of that is hand-holding the parents' hearts and helping them see and delight in the small progressions in their child." At the far end of this spectrum are terminal diagnoses that call for palliative care, where developmental goals are put aside and whole focus of the IDP Consultants work is supporting the parent-child relationship.

Wooldridge was drawn to the field because she wanted to work with very young children and their parents. - When you are involved at the very beginning, when those early relationships are being established, it has lifelong implications."

Wooldridge has a Bachelor of Arts with a major in developmental psychology, and is currently attending graduate school, working towards a Masters of Arts in Human Development.

The job prerequisites for an IDP consultant include, as a minimum, a four-year degree in a related field as well as experience working with children and families. Specific training, for instance in how to use assessment tools, is provided on the job ... often either directly by, or guided by, the soon-to-be defunct provincial office.

The IDP field has been underfunded for a long time, Wooldridge points out, and the newest funding cut will just make things worse.

The Surrey-White Rock Infant Development Program has had the longest, most persistent wait lists in BC for many years, says Wooldridge. -Our mandate is birth to three. In the distant past we were able to be responsive immediately and we got in to see newborns. But for the last 15 years the reality has been an average wait of six to eight months. For newborns, that is their whole life. We do have weighted priorities based on children's needs but those are overwhelming. Now we're having to prioritize the priority cases."

Without the support of the provincial office, the challenges will only get bigger. Nonetheless, says Wooldridge, the funding cuts have not compromised her team's commitment to running an effective, professional program that will provide meaningful support to the families of developmentally delayed babies. Although she admits to feeling cynical about the government's understanding of, and support for, her field, she has no such doubts about the value of her program.

-No matter what, those of us working in this field know we can make a difference to somebody," she says.

For more information about the Infant Development Program, the implications of the funding cuts, and links for writing letters of protest, go to [www.idpofbc.ca](http://www.idpofbc.ca). 

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