

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is a growing consensus that the early years of life are critical in the development and future well-being of children. During the first years of a child's life, his or her brain and nervous system undergo immense development. What happens to children from conception to five years of age helps to establish the foundation for how well they will do in all facets of their lives.

There have been several studies conducted over the past 10 years that have examined health outcomes among children. However, there are significant gaps in information on children, particularly at the local level and among children of pre-school age.

In January 2002, Public Health Units across Ontario received provincial funding to conduct Perinatal and Child Health Survey Strategy initiatives. Additional funding was subsequently made available for the calendar year 2003. Peel Health developed a telephone survey using items from existing survey instruments where possible. This report describes results of the Peel Pre-School Survey conducted in 2002.

The objectives of the study were:

- to establish baseline information from mothers of children aged 0-4, concerning their knowledge about and behaviours regarding a wide variety of health topics
- to identify health issues for Peel children aged 0-4 years of age
- to identify barriers to accessing health services, and opportunities to enhance health information, in order to direct and position the Early Years information campaigns.

Although the objectives of the study intended to examine children aged zero to four years, the actual results yielded information pertaining mostly to those aged zero to two years. This was a function of having asked parents with more than one child to answer questions based only on their youngest child.

### **METHODS**

The sampling frame for this survey was drawn from the Healthy Babies / Healthy Children Database (HBHC), also referred to as the Integrated Services for Children Information System (ISCIS). Included in the survey were mothers who resided in Peel Region, delivered a baby in 2000 or 2001 and spoke English according to information collected on screening tools used for the HBHC

program. The main study was conducted between May 6<sup>th</sup> and October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

A structured telephone survey was developed to collect data on a number of topics. These included: pregnancy and health, fetal alcohol syndrome, folic acid use, physical activity, reading to children, sun safety, second hand smoke, dental health, parenting, child care, family meals, food insecurity, child health issues, car seat safety, access to services and information, and demographic characteristics of mothers.

Questions were developed to assess mothers' knowledge and perceptions about health issues relevant to pregnant women, as well as parenting behaviours that influence child health.

## **RESULTS**

A total of 1,649 telephone surveys were completed (a response rate of 46%). Mothers in the survey tended to be slightly older and were more likely to be married compared to mothers giving birth in 1999. Two-thirds of the respondents were well-educated women (completed college, university or more) and the majority (81%) spoke English most often in the home. Sixty per cent of mothers were Canadian-born. When asked to which ethnic or cultural group their ancestors belonged, the most frequent responses included South Asian (19%), Canadian (16%), English (14%), and Italian (10%). Two-thirds of respondents were employed at the time of the survey. Over one-third reported that their household income was \$80,000 or higher. These demographic characteristics were found to be fairly comparable to Peel data from the 2001 Census.

Thirty-one per cent of respondents had a youngest child who was less than one year old, 44% had a youngest child who was one year old and 24% had a youngest child who was two years old at the time of the survey.

Overall, 58% of mothers reported taking a vitamin supplement containing folic acid. Women aged 30 years or older were more likely to have taken folic acid supplementation than younger women.

With respect to pregnancy and health, the majority of mothers consistently ranked the cutting down or elimination of both alcohol and smoking as the “most important thing to do”. However, for one-third of mothers, knowledge of the effects of alcohol on the fetus was poor, as they believed that one to two drinks in total during pregnancy would be “somewhat safe”, while a further 15% believed this amount to be “very safe”.

Nearly all mothers (99%) reported having a family physician or paediatrician, and among those, 84% indicated that they had not had difficulty getting an appointment for their child within the previous 12 months.

Mothers were also asked where they go to obtain information about parenting or children's health. The most common sources of information included friends and family (51%), books and library resources (43%), doctors (43%) and magazines (40%). Ten per cent of mothers reported obtaining information from Health Department services.

Only four per cent of mothers reported that their youngest child had asthma that had been diagnosed by a health professional.

Among all children for whom age and weight were provided, 78% were restrained in car seats appropriate to their age and weight.

With respect to dental health, 32% of mothers said that their children had taken a drink in a bottle to bed at some point in their lives. The majority of mothers (84%) reported that their children had teeth to brush. Among these, 75% of mothers said that they either brushed their children's teeth or supervised when they were brushing their teeth all the time. While 90% of mothers whose children had teeth reported having a family dentist, only 9% had actually taken their youngest child for a visit to the dentist.

Five per cent of mothers reported that someone in the household regularly smoked inside the home. The majority of mothers reported that smoking was not allowed in the home at all (94%), nor was it allowed in vehicles (94%).

Five per cent of mothers reported that in the 12 months prior to the survey, someone in the household worried that there would not be enough food to feed the family because of a lack of money, 9% reported that someone in the household did not eat the quality or variety of food they wanted because of a lack of money, and 4% reported that the family actually did not have enough food to eat because of a lack of money.

With respect to bicycle helmet use, 45% of mothers reported that their children aged one year or more rode bicycles, tricycles or rode in wagons; of these, only 60% always wore a helmet.

The most frequently used strategies by mothers of children aged one year or more to manage children's behaviour were talking calmly to their children (78%) or describing alternative behaviours (58%). The majority of mothers reported infrequent use of physical punishment (96%) or ignoring their child after inappropriate behaviour (93%).

Nineteen per cent of mothers identified that there were barriers to their youngest child being physically active; of these, 57% identified time, 39% identified lack of money and 15% said the cost of the activity was a barrier to participation.

Overall, 95% of mothers reported that their children were read to, with 75% of these being read to at least daily. About 50% of mothers said they or another adult had started to read to their child by the age of three months. This proportion increased to 75% by six months of age and to 87% by one year of age.

Five per cent of mothers reported that their children had been sunburned at some point in their lives. The most commonly used strategy to protect children from the sun was the use of protective clothing, with 88% of mothers reporting their children wore protective clothing “always” or “often”.

## **CONCLUSION**

The health practices of Peel parents of children aged 0 to 2 years are generally good. Most mothers are well-connected to services and seem to be aware of appropriate risk factors in the preconception period or during pregnancy. They also report good parenting practices as their children age. More focus needs to be placed on parents who are single, young, new immigrants or of low income in order to ensure that their children are given the resources and opportunities to develop to their fullest potential.