



State of Children and Youth in Larimer County Communities

Estes Park

The Healthier Communities Coalition of Larimer County (HCC) is creating a snapshot of the *State of Children and Youth in Larimer County Communities*. We are looking at a variety of areas including: caring adults, safe places during non-school hours, healthy lifestyle habits, an effective education, marketable skills and opportunities to serve others.

To compile quantitative data, HCC is partnering with the Colorado State University's Department of Human Development and Family Studies. The collected data will be broken down by community wherever possible, and also will include state level and national data for comparison's sake. Our goal is to release a printer version of the snapshot along with an executive summary in September 2008. We also plan to have the information on our website (www.healthylarimer.org) in a searchable format.

To complement this compilation of data, HCC has been collecting qualitative information from nearly 100 people throughout Larimer County who work with kids, as well as kids themselves. This information will help inform the executive summary that will be part of the snapshot.

What We Heard from the Estes Park Community

In talking with more than 20 people who work with children and youth in Estes Park, plus two groups of high-school aged youth, we heard many opinions about how kids are doing – both good and bad; what the strongest assets are; what the most critical issues are facing Estes' kids; and what resources are needed the most to serve kids better. It's not surprising that there are conflicting opinions about some issues, but there also is a lot of consensus.

In general, people feel that kids in Estes are doing “pretty good...on the whole, we are okay.” This was the feeling whether people were referring to young children, older youth or Latino kids.

Assets for Children and Youth

Most of the comments we received describing Estes Park's strongest assets for youth fall under the broad heading of “community.” People said Estes “is a caring community” – “people care about kids.” Many mentioned how supportive the business community is of

youth. Most employers are very accommodating when it comes to training youth and building their work schedule around youth's other activities. The service clubs also were mentioned as being very supportive of youth.

The small size of Estes was noted as an asset for youth. While living in a small town has disadvantages for some kids, it gives other a sense of connection.

The schools in Estes also were mentioned as an asset. Many people said there is "more cohesion and stability in the schools." Others said the teachers are high quality.

Other assets for youth include the many organizations that work to support them, such as Salud, Estes Valley Investment in Childhood Success, Partners Mentoring Youth, the restorative justice program and the library. Rocky Mountain National Park also is an asset that helps connect kids to the outdoors and the bike trail system in Estes provides safe transportation routes for kids. Additional assets mentioned are the swimming pool, sports programs throughout the school year and the Youth Center.

When youth were asked what they feel are Estes' assets for young people, they said: the option of alternative education; community service opportunities; the YMCA's gymnasium – although its hours of availability are limited; sports – except in the winter; the Youth Center – although it's outdated and really for younger kids; bowling alley and pool hall – although a lot of parents hang out there, too; the Mountain Shop's climbing wall; the swimming pool – but the locker rooms are pretty gross; Kids Quest (for little kids); downtown – it's a place to hang out; and the smallness of the community makes it easy to get around.

Critical Issues for Children and Youth

Family finances came up repeatedly as an issue that negatively impacts children and youth. Several interviewees mentioned that there is a growing gap between the "poor and the well-to-do" residents of Estes and the community's high cost of living. In two-parent families, more often than not, both parents have to work outside the home and many of those parents, as well as single parents, work at least two jobs to make ends meet. Children and youth from these families often lack adult supervision, proper nutrition, clothing and school supplies.

Right in line with this is a serious lack of affordable, quality, licensed child care for children from birth to 3 years old, especially in the Latino community. Often times, "children and youth go home unsupervised to care for younger siblings." Many interviewees noted that this lack of quality child care corresponds with a decrease in the number of young children receiving important, brain-nurturing stimuli. Another person pointed to the problem that "many parents seem to lack parenting skills [and general

education about child development], so their kids aren't getting what they need," including preventative health and dental care.

To support this notion that there is a need for more parent education, the library has noted a decrease in the number of families that take their children to the library, as well as the number of children and youth who participate in the summer reading program. One interviewee said, "Parents don't understand the importance of early literacy."

Other parents seem to lack education about good role modeling. "Many parents condone antisocial behavior," said one interviewee. Parental substance abuse, acting out in an anti-authoritarian ways, and fighting and violence seem to be problems for some parents. "There's a subculture and many parental attitudes that say drug, alcohol and tobacco use is okay." Some parents also seem to "coddle their middle and high school aged kids" and excuse their bad behavior.

Mental health and substance abuse are other issues people mentioned when asked how Estes kids are doing. People who work with kids feel middle and high school students (some estimate at least 20%) are disconnected, anti-social, depressed, suicidal and often turn to drugs and alcohol as an escape. Many mentioned that there needs to be support groups and more mental health services for kids and their families.

While a few interviewees said Estes has a lot of activities for kids, more said there aren't enough activities, nor enough corresponding safe places for kids to be when they're not in school. Specifically, people said there are several options for kids if they're into team sports, however, there aren't many options for youth with artistic or vocational education interests. And kids from low-income families are limited by the cost of participation in all activities.

In addition to the above issues, children and youth in Estes Park also seem to be challenges by peer pressure, racial tensions and discrimination.

Youth also told us about the challenges they face. They said: finding good role models; lack of family support/encouragement for education; lack of parental involvement in their kids' lives; family finances – there aren't enough good paying jobs; peer pressure; drugs, alcohol and tobacco use; cost of non-school hour activities; no indoor sports fields; limited winter activities; lack of respect for teens/discrimination based on age; lack of privacy due to living in a small town/rumors; and racism and a lack of diversity and respect for individualism.

Ideas About How to Better Support Children and Youth

When asked about what resources or best practices they would like to see infused into the community to better support kids, interviewees were enthusiastic and had many ideas.

Some people had very specific ideas about how child care and early childhood education could be improved. Among them are expanding the scholarship program available to families to help them pay for child care; making preschool universally accessible; compensating child care workers adequately, including benefits; and providing childhood development education for educators and child care providers, especially home child care providers. Likewise, people feel there should be a continuum of parent education available from pregnancy through the teen years.

Many ideas were given about how to better engage kids in after-school activities. At the top of the list and stated many times over was the establishment of a community center that includes space for recreation, such as year-round sports and dancing; learning, studying and tutoring; arts and crafts; music lessons and performance; cooking classes; vocational and continuing education; and a place for kids to hang out – like a teen lounge. People did acknowledge the Youth Center, but said it doesn't provide an environment conducive for studying. Older youth said it's not a place kids want to hang out after about 7th grade.

The youth we interviewed said they'd like to have a community center that included music, dance and singing lessons; tutoring and space to study; a graffiti wall; community sports teams that include kids and adults on the same teams; community events, fairs and carnivals; affordable after-school programs; a music performance area and a coffee bar.

Several interviewees mentioned reaching out to the Latino community in more intentional ways, such as the production of a Spanish language newspaper, having more Spanish-speaking professionals in the schools, providing opportunities for multicultural interaction at the community level and parenting classes taught in Spanish.

The Healthier Communities Coalition of Larimer County (HCC) is a coalition of nonprofit, government, business and citizen leaders focused on improving the health and well-being of our children and youth. HCC does this by serving as a relationship broker, networker, communicator, convener, facilitator, researcher and capacity builder for the family and youth service providers throughout Larimer County.