

## Regional council hears of progress being made by OEYCs

By Bill Rea

Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYC) have been doing good work and drawing positive comments.

Peel Regional councillors were recently updated on the progress of these facilities.

Jane Van Berkel, executive director of Child Development Resource Connection Peel headed the delegation.

Regional staff reported OEYCs were launched by the Province in 2002 to help support the development of children in their first six years. There are 103 of these centres in Ontario with eight in Peel, including one at Caledon Parent-Child Centre (CPCC). The staff report stated their mandate is to help all parents and caregivers give their young children, including children with special needs, the best start in life.

The report added OEYCs in Peel provide universal and specialized programs that are based on the needs of local families. They also make referrals to local child-care providers, as well as supplying support services. These centres employ staff with ranging expertise in early childhood development.

Programs are available during and after traditional hours, including Saturdays, to accommodate working parents.

There were more than 17,000 program sessions offered to Peel families at OEYCs last year. They were used by roughly 19,940 children (aged zero to six) and about 21,800 parents or caregivers.

The Province released the Ontario Early Years Policy Framework in January 2013. The staff report said it sets out a vision for a more integrated and coordinated early-years system. Staff added the Province has committed to finalizing an approach by this fall, although they couldn't say at that point what impact the Provincial election might have.

In her presentation to Regional council, Van Berkel said that as of April 1, OEYCs are funded by the Ministry of Education. That means they don't have to charge user fees. She also said staffs at these centres reflect the population makeup in Peel.

Van Berkel stressed the importance of the first six years of life, as well as the role the family plays in that period.

"The family is the child's first educator, and the cheerleader for the child as well," she told councillors. She also pointed out the families are competent and capable, as well as rich in experience. Van Berkel added families want their children to succeed, and they deserve to be connected in meaningful ways to programs and services in their communities.

She stated the goals of OEYCs are to build on parents' strengths through play-based learning to engage them in the child's development. The aim is to promote healthy child development.

The services provided at OEYCs are inclusive and accessible.

Van Berkel said there are some programs that are unique to OEYCs in Peel, addressing such issues as the needs of fathers, teen parents, post-partum mood disorders, languages, infant massage, etc.

Among the outcomes she cites included connecting families with other families, providing them with access to resources and information to support them in their parenting roles, and providing them with timely and accurate referrals in the community. For the children, she said the benefits include forming relationships in inclusive environments, as well as engagement and well-being.

Councillor Patti Foley commented on her experiences and those of her children with CPCC.

"It was the right place for us at that time," she said.