

Early Words Nunavut: A Case Study

A collage of six photographs showing community members, including children and adults, holding and displaying various books in different settings like a daycare, a library, and a grocery store. The top-left photo shows a woman holding a child and a book titled "The Three Little SUPERPIGS". The top-right photo shows three women holding books in front of a "WELCOME TO LAKE DAYCARE" sign. The bottom-left photo shows two women and a child in a grocery store, with one woman holding a book. The bottom-right photo shows two women wearing masks and holding books in a library or bookstore. The middle photo shows a woman holding a book titled "Mamaqtuq! Friend".



Fondation pour
l'alphabétisation
des enfants
canadiens

Overview

Early Words is a Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation program that connects key professionals with resources to help families get their little ones off to a good start on their reading journey. The program collaborates with medical clinics, health centres, hospitals, and communities to help families strengthen their baby's brain development and lay a foundation for lifelong literacy.

The Early Words program is offered in 95 clinics and health centres across Canada, poised to impact 44,000 children by October 2024. Its success is a story of commitment, vision, and the power of community building.

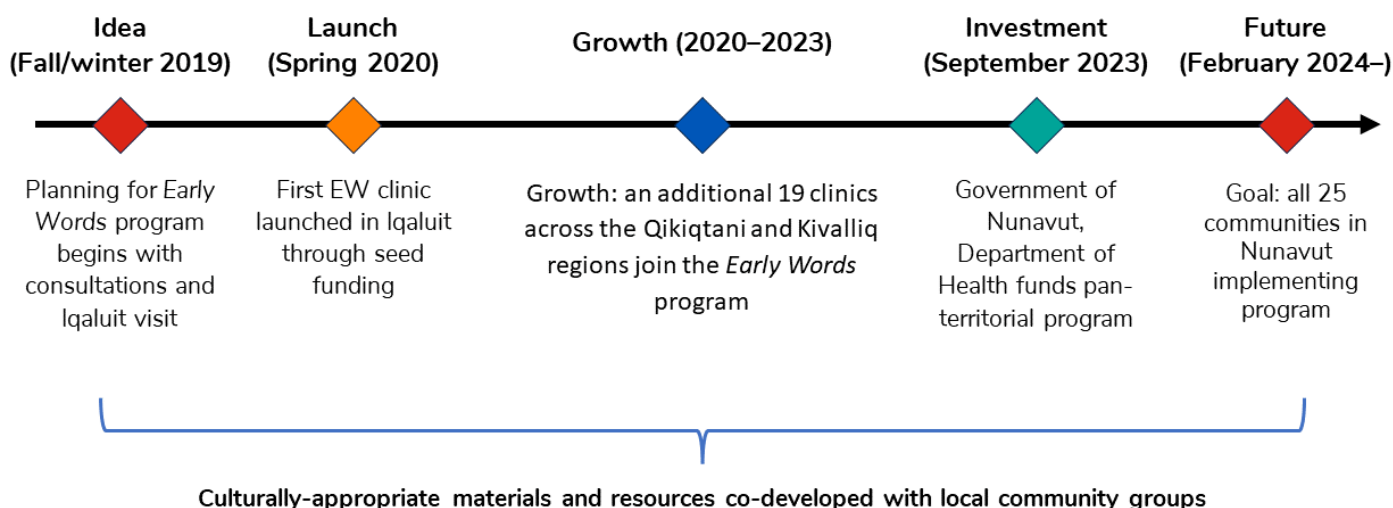
And it all started in Nunavut.

The case for healthcare-based early literacy counselling

Literacy and health are intertwined, with early literacy experiences significantly impacting children's long-term physical and mental well-being.

Leveraging healthcare providers as conduits for support is effective, as evidenced by impactful programs like Reach Out and Read in the United States. In Canada, organizations like the Canadian Medical Association and the Canadian Paediatric Society had been vocal about the instrumental effect that healthcare providers could have on supporting children on their reading journeys.

Success Story: A Timeline of Early Words in Nunavut

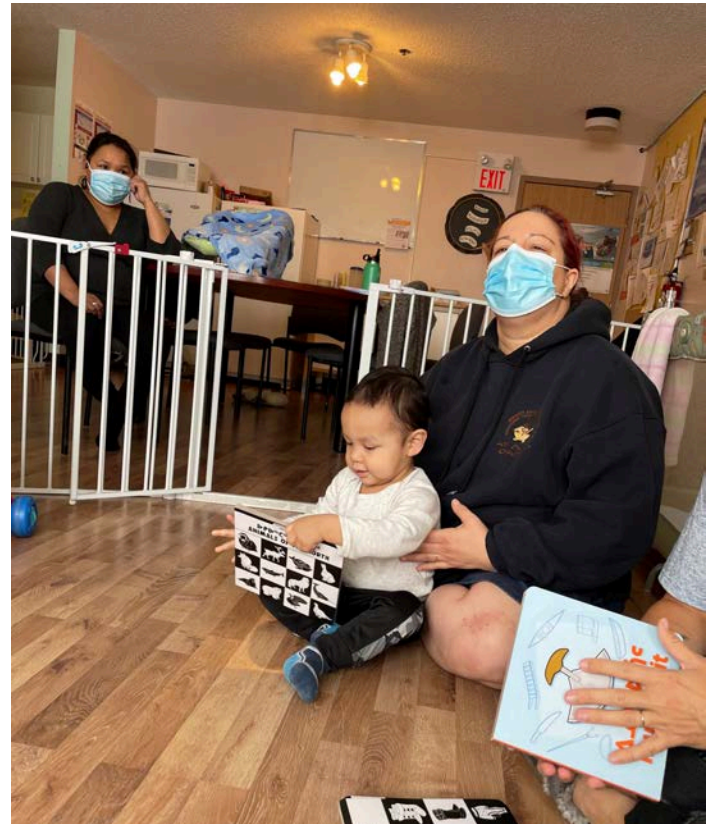


Inception (Fall/winter 2019)

We set out to establish a Canada-wide early literacy program that could reach the greatest number of families through existing healthcare channels that they were already accessing. Nunavut, with its unique challenges (remote communities, limited resources, and accessibility challenges) and historically low literacy levels, emerged as a prime location for such a program.

In fall 2019, we travelled to Iqaluit to seek input, feedback, and support on the idea of the program, and met with local partners in the health sector and beyond — such as Iqaluit Public Health, Inhabit Media, local healthcare professionals, and the Nunavut Literacy Council. After consulting over 175 literacy, community, education, and healthcare providers and experts across the country, we were grateful to receive active support from Iqaluit Public Health, a leading local pediatrician, and public health nurses.

We began to lay the groundwork for a pilot project, and in March 2020, we were ready to launch the pilot in Iqaluit and begin making inroads.



Baby Jay and mom Lesley interacting with books during the CCLF team's 2019 visit to Iqaluit.

"I always tell moms, even if they struggle with literacy themselves, that even holding the books for the kids and interacting with them and the pictures is great for early literacy practice."

—Oopik Aglukark, Public Health Nurse (Arviat, NU)



Oopik Aglukark, Public Health Nurse in Arviat

Launch (Spring 2020)

In March 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Early Words pilot was launched at a single Public Health clinic in Iqaluit. In the early days of the pandemic, healthcare providers in Nunavut realized that families who were already struggling with isolation and low literacy would be further impacted by pandemic-related closures.

They knew how to help. Drawing on the information from Early Words and their own expertise, the healthcare team at the pilot site started talking to families about the importance of literacy-building activities at home during routine healthcare appointments. They also distributed high-quality and culturally reflective books, available through the Early Words program.

Based on advice from frontline providers and other partners in Nunavut, further engagement about Early Words programming came from Nunavut's Community Health Representatives (CHRs), who work within communities to implement health promotion and illness prevention initiatives.

The Iqaluit pilot was a resounding success. As families continued to receive information about early literacy as well as books to help them put that information into practice, other communities in the region began to hear about the program. These communities expressed interest in the Early Words program and invited us to collaborate with them in implementing the program in their own health centres.

"We ventured on this work with the Early Words team for Baffin during the pandemic and it is extremely successful, with hundreds of free books getting into the hands of families."

— Chris Nolan, Assistant Deputy Minister of Programs and Standards at Nunavut Department of Health



Staff at Clyde River, Nunavut

Growth (2020–2023)

Over the next few years, the Early Words program grew across Nunavut. By fall 2020, an initial twelve health centres in the Qikiqtaaluk region had joined the program. In winter 2021/22, another six health centres from the Kivalliq region became Early Words sites. And in winter 2024, the final two health centres from Kivalliq joined the program.

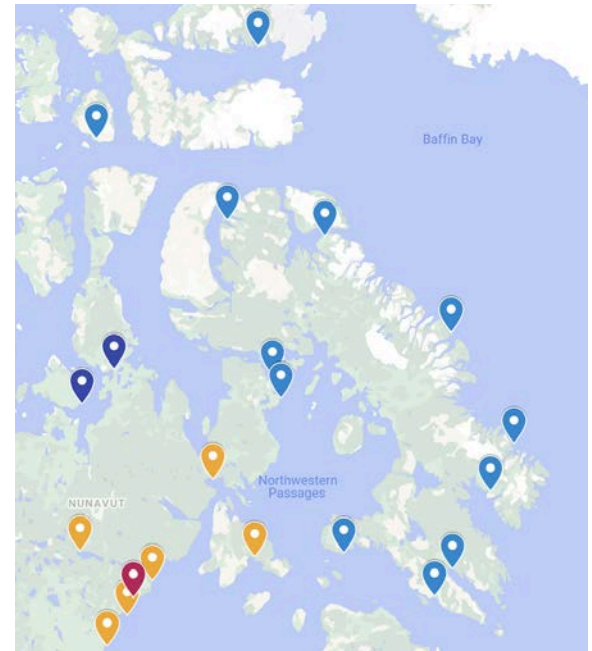
This rapid growth — from one initial site to twenty over four years — was enabled by collaboration with local partners, investment from the Government of Nunavut, and engagement with the community.

Collaboration

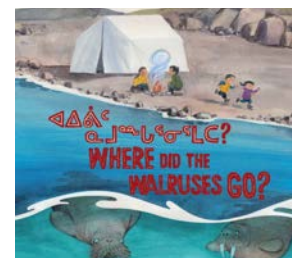
The Early Words program's success in Nunavut reflects the generous contributions of community leaders, who share knowledge, time, and resources to ensure the program reflects local indigenous perspectives.

Having worked closely with Nunavut partners for the past few years, the Early Words team is acutely aware of the unique challenges facing the territory's healthcare sector, families and children. We believe that through reciprocity, transparency, and authentic engagement with those who are best positioned to tell us what they need, we can co-create impactful solutions to address the Department of Health's priorities. This includes leaders, professionals, child- and family-serving organizations, advocates, and caregivers in the communities.

Culturally relevant books: All Early Words books offered to families in Nunavut are relevant to local communities and available in Inuktitut. We work alongside Inuit-owned publishers Inhabit Media and Arvaaq Press (formerly Inhabit Education) to source and provide culturally relevant books to health centres delivering the program in Nunavut. Books are also available in Inuinnaqtun and are reviewed by local advisors to ensure materials reflect Inuit children, families, and cultural activities.



Locations of Early Words sites across Nunavut



A selection of English and Inuktitut books available from the Early Words program

Collaboration

This illustration depicts three different leisure activities. In the top left, a woman wearing a blue jacket and a headscarf sits on a wooden bench with two young children, a boy in a green sweater and a girl in a pink sweater. In the top right, a man in a blue t-shirt sits on a large purple beanbag chair, reading a book to a young child who is sitting on his lap. In the bottom left, a woman in a yellow headscarf and blue dress is kneeling on the floor, working with clay on a pottery wheel, while a young boy in a blue shirt and white cap watches her. Faint musical notes are floating in the air around them.

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Growth (2020–2023)

Collaboration

Community Health Representatives: Frontline healthcare providers and other partners in Nunavut advised involving Community Health Representatives to support program delivery on an ongoing and expanded basis. CHR involvement is an ideal way to ensure program continuity, given the unique relationship they have with the families, as well as the realities of nursing turnover. We are honoured to be working closely with Territorial Community Health Representative Coordinator, who invited the Early Words team to present at the monthly territorial CHR trainings. We look forward to continued engagement with them.



Public health nurses Ann Coquilla and Amiel Hernandez at Iqaluit Public Health, with their Early Words books

Region-specific resources: Through consultations with families, we also developed a Nunavut-specific “Tip Sheet” (available in English, French, and Inuktitut), featuring advice about screentime and links to existing digital resources to support Inuktitut language learning.

Innuqiniq teachings: Local organizations like the Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre (QHRC) also strengthened the program's impact by helping it incorporate Innuqiniq teachings to better meet the needs of the community.

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Collaborating for Impact

Investment

The Government of Nunavut, Department of Health recognized the parallels between Early Words' work and their own priorities. That is why, after the first three years of the program's implementation, the Government of Nunavut decided to support its growth across the territory by graciously committing about half a million dollars in multi-year funding.

This funding demonstrates a commitment to creating overarching, system-level change in the region, and will contribute to the program's sustainability in the years to come. We're grateful to the government for seeing the value of the Early Words program to the communities, and for choosing to invest in early literacy.



Community members attending the literacy booth at the Northern Store event



Crystal sharing a book with her daughter, Jennifer

Collaborating for Impact

Engagement

Over the years, we have built strong relationships with staff in the communities in which Early Words operates. As the program reached more and more families and acquired financial support from the government, it gained momentum across the region: other communities graciously began inviting us to come talk to them about the program.

In late 2023, representatives from Arviat, Baker Lake, and Rankin Inlet invited us to meet with them to discuss early literacy and the Early Words program. These on-the-ground discussions with community members, Elders, Public Health Nurses, and Community Health Representatives allow us to continue tailoring the program to meet the evolving needs of these communities.

While visiting Baker Lake, we held two community events in partnership with the Baker Lake Health Centre to help families better understand early literacy and develop their confidence in performing early literacy-building activities with their children.

The first was a story time community event where children received books and blankets, as well as pillows (sewn by local community members) with special pockets to carry the books in. Two Elders from the community told stories from their childhood, and children's book author Paula Ikuutaq Rumbolt read a story.

The second event featured an early literacy booth at the Northern store, where a table was set up to distribute books to children ranging in age from babies to teens. Families learned about their role in supporting early literacy development, and received resources on early literacy and screen time, in both Inuktitut and English.

Events such as these strengthen the community's engagement with the core concepts of the Early Words program and help lay the foundations for incorporating early literacy into their daily lives, all while keeping the regional context front of mind. We remain deeply committed to engaging community members across Nunavut, wherever we are invited to work



The Baker Lake Daycare team



Community Health Representative Joan Killulark at the story time community event

Future (2024–)

As of June 2024, the Early Words program is operating in 98 clinics and health centres across Canada (22 of which are in Nunavut) and reaching over 44,000 children.

None of this would have been possible without the program's initial success in Nunavut. The commitment by everyone involved in the program in Nunavut has been nothing short of remarkable: it is what propelled the program from a seedling pilot in 2020 to a robust program with substantial funding from the Government of Nunavut today

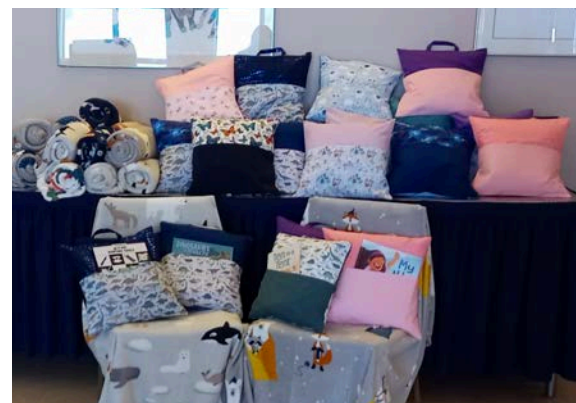
Early Words is now in 22 communities across the Qikiqtaaluk, Kivalliq and Kitikmeot regions.

We intend to maintain this reach and impact through

- Continuing our focus on community capacity-building
- Identifying additional literacy-related areas where we can support
- Refining our resources as needed
- Co-developing a culturally safe mechanism for obtaining program feedback from community
- Maintaining a close relationship with the government of Nunavut in ensuring our shared goals are met
- Embedding early literacy into public health through nursing training orientation and electronic medical record (EMR) integration

We're excited to continue partnering with CHRs to expand program delivery and reach families in a culturally inclusive manner. Our immediate area of focus is to introduce Early Words to the three remaining communities in the Kitikmeot region, and to work with the community and the Government of Nunavut to ensure current materials are developed in Inuinnaqtun. Our broader goal is to integrate the Early Words program into all 25 communities across the territory.

As we look to the future, we remain excited and honoured to continue to work alongside local professionals, and to help expand access to literacy skills in Nunavut.



*Pillows with special pockets to carry books
(sewn by local community members)*



*Seepoola Nauyuk (Canada Prenatal Nutrition
Program Coordinator) and Katie Hughes,
(Executive Director, Tasiuqtigiit Society)*



*Kristen Hebert Public Health Nurse Practice
Consultant — Qikiqtaaluk Region) and Chloe
Norris (Acting Public Health Nursing Practice
Consultant for Kivalliq Region)*