

A photograph showing a child's hands reaching out towards a green play tent. The tent is made of a light green fabric with dark green structural lines. The child's hands are positioned as if they are about to touch or enter the tent. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Connections Early Years Family Centre

Strategic Plan 2024-2028



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Message from the Board President and Executive Director

To say that it is a privilege to provide leadership to Connections is an understatement. This organization touches lives in ways that we hear about not only in the moment but sometimes decades later when children who came here bring their own children or when we are stopped in the street and thanked for what we do.

As Board President and Executive Director, we know that the work of Connections happens because of the commitment of our team of employees and volunteers who bring not only their expertise and training but their love of children to our building each day.

The past five years have been some of the most challenging and rewarding for our agency. Rebuilding our venerable home was already a major project but we did it while responding to a once in a century global event. We knew that our team would rise to the challenge, but we cannot say enough how grateful we are to each staff person, volunteer, parent and child for their flexibility and commitment.

This strategic plan sets out the pathway for the next five years of what we envision to be a very long and successful future for Connections and for the children and families who will benefit from what we do. While our focus is turning inwards, our vision is always outwards. We do what we do because we believe that it is children who make our community better.

We are pleased to endorse the 2024 - 2028 Strategic Plan for Connections and we invite the community to join us on the journey.

Board President:

Executive Director:

Our Vision

A community of strong, connected families engaged in raising their young children to reach their full potential.

Our Mission

To provide support, resources, and individualized services in French and English to promote the early learning and healthy development of our diverse community of families and their young children (0-6 years old) in Windsor-Essex County.



Who We Are

Connections is a charitable organization that advances the healthy development of families and their children 0 - 6 years through family centered support, early learning opportunities, early identification, and intervention services in English and French.

Connections exists so that our youngest children are supported through meaningful opportunities to play, grow, and discover. In the 50 years since its creation by local volunteers, Connections has become an exceptional resource for children, families, caregivers, volunteers, and community agencies in Windsor and Essex County.

Connections is located in Windsor, Ontario which is situated on the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, which includes the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatomie peoples. In acknowledging the Indigenous Peoples, many of whom continue to live and work here today, we are sharing our friendship, respect, and appreciation of the resources we have received from the land.

Play isn't just about fun – its about learning too. Our space is welcoming and accessible, with something for every family and their young children. When we play together, children explore their world and build critical skills that bring a lifetime of benefits. We provide engaging indoor and outdoor environments, all to enrich children with the stimulation to fire their imagination and support their learning and social skills.

Grow and learn about your child's development. Big change starts small – during the first 6 years, your child's brain develops faster than at any other time. It is a time when the building blocks are established. Whether you have quiet questions or want to know more about how to be the best parent you can be, we offer programs and services that address your needs and help families grow together.

Discover opportunities for early learning and responsive caregiving. Nurtured children are the consequence of nurturing adults: to invest in children means also investing in the people around them – the parents, caregivers, grandparents, early years workforce, volunteers and more. Knowledge and skills are important, but so too is wellbeing. We create connections and partnerships with other community agencies to help families access services and maximize the resources available to them. We invite families of all shapes, sizes, and circumstances to access our network of support.



Our Values

As an organization we are:

Family-focused: We consider what is best for everyone in the families we support so they can grow and learn together.

Inclusive: We recognize individual strengths, respect opinions, and honour and value diversity in a space that is welcoming and accessible.

Responsive: We get to know the families and stay close to what the parents, children, and communities need so we can proactively design flexible and useful services.

Innovative: We are brave in leading new approaches and programmes that can benefit families in our community and beyond.

Advocates: We are a respected voice for the needs of children and families, and champion policies that will support them to thrive in the future.

Commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Connections is for everyone. We celebrate the diversity of the world and are committed to including every race, colour, national origin, ancestry, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, or ability in our activities. In our ever-changing and increasingly diverse world, Connections fosters environments and programs that are accessible, equitable, diverse, inclusive and celebrate different ways of knowing. We are committed to the following principles:

- **Accessibility:** We provide an accessible, welcoming, and user-friendly space that continuously works towards meeting the needs of families, staff, volunteers, and visitors (physically, developmentally, emotionally, financially).
- **Equity:** We strive to ensure meaningful engagement opportunities that are fair, open, and respectful while addressing any imbalances.
- **Diversity:** We recognize that individuals uniquely represent different social and historical backgrounds; we invite families, staff, and volunteers interested to participate in and guide us in the continual development of programming offered at Connections. We are keen to continually learn, incorporate, and celebrate cultural perspectives in the programming offered.
- **Inclusion:** We incorporate a family-centered focus that aims to reduce barriers and create a safe and welcoming environment for our families, staff, and volunteers.
- **Different ways of knowing:** We strive to foster a sense of belonging and empowerment by listening to our families, staff, and volunteers. We proactively find ways to support and encourage people with no voice, facing incredible challenges to raising their families, and find ways to work with them to identify and recognize what support they need.



Background to this Plan

In 2018, Connections kicked off its five-year strategic plan with a vision to renovate and revitalize its iconic location on Giles Boulevard East to be an accessible destination for families and children seeking support for healthy development.

Between 2018 – 2023, Connections, like every other agency and organization in the world, experienced the global COVID pandemic. No one could have planned for an event that would upend the delivery of supports to newborns and growing children during the most formative years of their lives. Connections was able to rely on its history of resiliency and creativity to find new and innovative ways to provide supports and has emerged from the pandemic stronger and more vital. It was also able to continue completing the building project despite the many new obstacles provided by a world that was shut down for almost two years.

In the time between 2018 and 2023, Connections also learned that the community was changing in important ways. Windsor's population demographics are changing as it welcomes many more newcomers, invests in new and emerging major industries, and shifts its geographical boundaries towards the east and the new battery plant and hospital. There has also been a provincial change in government and with it some new priorities. Because Connections operates largely as a 'transfer payment agency' or a not for profit which receives government funding to deliver services, it must always remain alert to changes in the governance of the municipality and the province.

Finally, and significantly, the pandemic accelerated and changed the ways people use and expect to use technology, not only to replace face to face service delivery but also in the ways we educate children and connect to one another.

Connections engaged a consultant to help it understand these changes and guide the board, staff and volunteers through a process of strategic visioning where they considered a range of possible futures in which Connections would continue to thrive. That exercise resulted in the strategic directions and planned projects that are outlined in this report. What the pandemic drove home for many organizations, and Connections is no exception, is that having strong roots and flexible branches is necessary. The last plan was focused on the foundations of the physical building and this plan is focused on the foundations of the organization.

Our philosophy of childhood is that children need love, stability, safety, and support from engaged adults in a positive environment where they can explore, ask questions, and discover. By ensuring that Connections is a strong organization, we ensure that our support of families and children is robust, creative, and loving.



Thriving through Connections: Strategic Plan 2024 - 2028

Connecting through Governance: Board Leadership

Connections is only as strong as the scaffolding that ensures its day-to-day operations. In our last strategic plan, we had literal scaffolding surrounding the building as we renewed our physical plant to be modern, accessible, and flexible. In this plan, we are repurposing the scaffolding to surround our governance and organizational management to also be modern, accessible, and flexible.

In this next five-year cycle, we are turning our attention to succession planning and policy renewal for both our Board of Directors and our day-to-day operations. Our organization has had many wonderful long serving leaders who have guided us through times of great change and growth, but we cannot continue to expect more and more of the same people. For this planning cycle we will focus on Board and senior leadership succession planning to balance institutional knowledge and history with renewal.

At the end of this plan Connections will have a long-term plan for sustainability and our Board and operational team will be regarded as an example of strong and innovative leadership in the children and family services sectors.

Connecting Community: Organizational Leadership

COVID-19 highlighted gaps in the policy management of many non-profit organizations and Connections was no exception. Connections is proud of how fast and successfully it was able to pivot to ensure that families and children got the support they needed. But they realize how important it is to have a policy structure that is clear, up to date and flexible. During this plan we will be reviewing our policy gaps, researching best practices, and renewing our Board and operational policy structure.

Our last plan more than achieved its goal of renewing our wonderful home. But it also required a dedicated team of Board and staff fundraising in ways we had not previously envisaged. We are proud of our success and the growth in the number of people and organizations who supported the value of Connections through their fundraising dollars. We still have work to do to finish paying for our renovations, but we want to learn from our experience of the last few years to understand the relationship of fundraising to our core operations and values. In this plan we will study our revenue sources including government funding, grants, fundraising and charging fees for services. This will enable us to connect our outcomes to our ability to be financially stable and true to our core values.



Connecting Families: Service Leadership

Digital technology is transforming our lives in every sector and almost every aspect. We see it in the near universal presence of smart phones to virtual service delivery to the growth of digital children's toys and games. Even UNICEF has started to express the need to understand and plan for the impact of the digital world on the lives of children and the organizations who work with them.

In this strategic plan we will spend time understanding the implications of technological change on our work from how we manage our office operations to how we support children and families. This will include understanding how we can manage our business more efficiently through digital and virtual tools, how we collect and analyze data to identify opportunities for improvements in our services and how we work with families to understand the impact of digital technology on the lives of their children.

We know that talking about digital technology and children creates a lot of feelings and we will work to ensure that our work provides space for debate and discussion while relying on the best practices and research being developed in the field. Our partners and our families will be central to how we develop our digital strategy and use our learning to support others in the sector.

At the end of this plan Connections will be ready to engage with the changing digital world in ways that maintain our values of personal and face to face connection.







The global pandemic upended much of what we believed to be stable about the world. Digital transformation is happening much faster than anticipated. The cost of living and housing has exploded and is placing unprecedented pressures on families. Policy makers are under pressure from all sides to be more efficient and effective. Sometimes it seems like only the loudest voices are heard.

Connections has always had a role as a respected voice for needs of children and families. In these times of upheaval in the broader society and in policy and planning for children's services, we want to use this planning cycle to improve our ability to see issues and advocate for policy that supports families and children to thrive in the future. We will use this time to understand what our role as advocates could and should be, how to be most effective and provide support to partners and individuals to engage in policy discussions that can impact their lives.

At the end of this plan Connections will have an enhanced position as a trusted voice for the sector for organizations and families and its expertise is sought out by decision makers.



The Priorities

Priority	Timeframe	Community	Families	Connections
Board Leadership				
Board Governance / Succession Planning	2024 - 2025			
Board Governance / Board Policy Review	2024 - 2025			
Organizational Leadership				
Organizational Policy Stabilization	2024 - 2027			
Revenue Strategy	2024 - 2027			
Service Leadership				
Information and Data Management Strategy	2025 - 2027			
Advocacy Policy and Strategy	2024 - 2027			



Task / Action / Step	How does it benefit Connections	What are the risks?	When should it happen?	Who should do it?	It is successful when?	Story of the future
The Priorities						
Board Leadership						
Board Governance / Succession Planning	Long term board planning, improved board governance	Long serving board members may leave taking valuable institutional knowledge.	Milestones <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Consider what skills are needed on Connections board (by AGM 2024) 2) Create a skills matrix for future Board recruitment (by AGM 2024) 	Board supported by ED	The Board is made up of enthusiastic, energetic, and committed members and members are chosen for their skills to support the vision of Connections.	Connections is regarded as a strong and stable board and recruitment is easy
Board Governance / Board Policy Review	Long term board planning, informed board re: governance, effective board meetings	Time consuming, may require expert legal or consulting support, may alter historical practices	Milestones <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Review existing Board governance policies and map to core decision making practices (e.g., who does what in key domains) (spring 2024) 2) Research best practice for board governance policies (spring 2024) 3) Develop Board policy framework (what is Board /what is ED) (by AGM in 2024) 4) Write new Board-governed policy manual (by end of 2024) 5) Map operational policy manual to Board-governed policy manual (by AGM in 2025) 	Board, supported by consultant and ED	The Board knows its role and does not interfere with the operational work of Connections without clearly knowing why. The Board focuses on strategic decisions that impact the organization's long-term success.	Connections is looked to as an example of strong and innovative board leadership in the children's services sector.



Task / Action / Step	How does it benefit Connections	What are the risks?	When should it happen?	Who should do it?	It is successful when?	Story of the future
<i>Organizational Leadership</i>						
Organizational Policy Stabilization	Stability, succession planning, knowledge transfer, staff development	Time consuming, can cause organizational rigidity	Milestones <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Engage a third party to review policy framework and gap analysis (by Spring 2024) 2) Identify priority policies, train policy writers, identify policy implementation deadlines / schedule. (by Spring 2024) 3) Develop a monitoring and review schedule and assign responsibility for policies going forward. (by Spring 2025) 	ED, Senior Administrator, Program Managers	When Connections has an up-to-date policy manual that addresses the core public and internal service requirements of the organization.	Connections is a policy driven organization where decisions are made at the right level of the organization and staff understand their rights, roles, and responsibilities.



<p><i>Fundraising / Revenue Strategy</i></p>	<p>Finish fundraising for Building Up and have a sustainable plan.</p> <p>Fundraising that connects the community to the agency</p> <p>Answer the question about Fee For Service clients in this plan.</p>	<p>Time consuming. May require new staff, Board needs to support fundraising. Saying no to Fee For Service clients is risky.</p>	<p>Milestones</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Strike Community Awareness and Fund Development board / staff committee to consider revenue / fundraising options (before end of 2023) 2) Review existing and possible future service needs at a detailed level (before next AGM in 2024) 3) Board Decision on how to manage Fee for Service clients or provincial expectations (before next AGM in 2024) 4) Research funding and revenue sources including fee for service delivery, fundraising for operating money, fundraising for capital money, social enterprise. (before next AGM in 2024) 5) Map program needs to possible funding or revenue sources (before next AGM in 2024) 6) Develop a revenue strategy mapping long term funding and program needs to realistic revenue sources (before fiscal year end 2025) 7) Develop a revenue / fundraising / donation management policy (where are funds directed, how is capital v. income managed) (before fiscal year end 2025) 8) Report on success of revenue strategy (End of fiscal 2026) 	<p>Board Chair, Treasurer, ED, and Community Awareness and Fund Development Committee Senior Administration and Program Managers.</p>	<p>Connections has a long term, stable and diverse revenue stream that is efficient in terms of the staff time required to generate revenue and effective in supporting existing and future program needs.</p>	<p>Connections is financially robust to risks of political / policy change and able to identify and support emerging issues and needs in the community without funder dependence.</p>
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Task / Action / Step	How does it benefit Connections	What are the risks?	When should it happen?	Who should do it?	It is successful when?	Story of the future
<i>Service Leadership</i>						
Information and Data Management Strategy	Understanding the implications of technological change on organizational management, data analysis, partnership collaboration, and service delivery in the children's services sector.	Time consuming, creates fear of change in organization, change management required, temporary service delivery risks as organization adjusts. May require outside assistance	Milestones 1) Develop Board / Staff taskforce for technology review (by end of 2024) 2) Develop a map of existing technology and data sets (by end of 2025) 3) Research best practices on technology in children's services (operational and service delivery) (by end of 2025) 4) Adopt Digital Strategy (AGM 2026) 5) Develop project plan for implementation (AGM 2026)	Board / Staff task force, ED, Senior Administrator	The management and operation of Connections is efficient and effective and supports technology changes in the community, with partners and with families.	Connections is well positioned and robust in the use and adoption of technology in management and service delivery.
Advocacy Policy and Strategy	Knowing when to advocate about what, skills in successful advocacy, teaching parents, knowledge retention	Time consuming May require specialized staff / skills. Can antagonize funders.	Milestones 1) Consider advocacy needs / issues (by Spring 2024) 2) Identify advocacy policy needs for Board / Staff (who speaks to whom, about what?) (by Spring 2024) 3) Identify advocacy training needs for Board / Staff (by Spring 2024) 4) Regular / ongoing review of advocacy planning, actions, and effectiveness (annual Board report)	Board / Staff standing committee, ED, Senior staff	Connections Board and Staff are confident in when and how to advocate for the organization and for families / children in the community.	Connections is a trusted voice for the sector and listened to by decision makers.

