

# Online Prenatal and New Parent Program

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**To:** Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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## Recommendations

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It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

## Key Points

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- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health offers a free online program to individuals and families who are pregnant or have a new baby called the Online Prenatal and New Parent Program.
- In 2024, WDG Public Health launched a communications campaign to increase program awareness and participation.
- The campaign resulted in a 91% increase in program registrations.
- WDG Public Health's prenatal program is effectively reaching WDG's prenatal population across all age groups and geographic regions, including priority groups such as those under the age of 25 years and in their first trimester of pregnancy.
- WDG Public Health will continue to promote the program by leveraging strengths of the communications campaign and utilizing emerging social media tactics to further increase program awareness and participation.

## Background

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Prenatal education is an important part of a healthy pregnancy. Learning about pregnancy, birth and caring for a newborn through formal prenatal education programs is associated with many health benefits for parent and baby. These benefits include improved maternal mental health, increased preparedness for birth, greater confidence in caring for the baby, a higher likelihood of breastfeeding and greater satisfaction in both partner relationships and parent-baby bonding.<sup>1</sup>

Ontario public health units are mandated to deliver a program of public health interventions to support healthy growth and development among residents, including healthy pregnancies, preparation for parenting, breastfeeding and child growth and development.<sup>2</sup> For decades, WDG Public Health has offered prenatal education services to individuals and families who are pregnant or have a new baby and live in WDG. Since 2019, WDG Public Health has delivered prenatal education through a free online program called the Online Pregnancy and New Parent Program, which is hosted by InJoy Health Education. This program includes information about having a healthy pregnancy, labour and birth, medical interventions, caring for a newborn and breastfeeding, and includes information about local services and programs. As an online program, participants can complete it at their own pace from the comfort of their home using any electronic device. Participants have access to the program for a full year and learn evidence-based health information through engaging formats such as videos and interactive activities. The program is not restricted to those who are pregnant but can also be completed by a partner or support person, as well as by those who have already given birth.

In 2024, WDG Public Health completed an evaluation of its Online Prenatal and New Parent Program's registration data and implemented a communications campaign. The purpose of this work was to increase program participation and to ensure communication strategies were effective at reaching WDG's prenatal population.

## Discussion

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To inform the development of a comprehensive communications campaign, a situational assessment was conducted that reviewed provincial trends in prenatal education participation and promotion, existing WDG Public Health program promotions and registration data and WDG prenatal population surveillance data from the Better Outcomes Registry and Network (BORN) database.<sup>1,3,4</sup> This work was conducted in 2023 and examined WDG Public Health program and BORN data from 2022.

## Prenatal Education Participation Trends in WDG

Rates of participation in prenatal education have risen in the last decade yet continue to remain low despite the benefits of prenatal education on maternal and child outcomes. In 2014, there were 3,114 births among WDG residents and 3,313 births in 2022.<sup>4</sup> According to BORN data, the percentage of WDG residents who gave birth and participated in some form of prenatal education increased from 23% in 2014 to 42% in 2022.<sup>4</sup> However, participation in WDG Public Health's online prenatal program has been low, with only 518 registrants in 2022.<sup>3</sup> While parents have access to various free and paid prenatal education options, this identified an opportunity for WDG Public Health to raise awareness of its program.

Provincial research recommends that communication strategies aim to reach all future parents and their partners or support persons, while also specifically targeting priority groups such as those in their first trimester of pregnancy and those under the age of 25 years who report the lowest levels of prenatal education.<sup>1</sup> According to BORN, only 3% of WDG residents 18 to 24 years who gave birth in 2022 participated in prenatal education.<sup>4</sup>

## 2024 Communications Campaign Description

The objectives of the communications campaign were to:

- Increase program registrations by 25% from 2022;
- Enhance program awareness and accessibility for all parents across WDG, with a special focus on individuals under the age of 25 years;
- Strengthen program messaging to encourage early registration during the first trimester; and
- Establish a continuous communications strategy to promote the program year round.

The year-long campaign consisted of four phases, each of which was evaluated to inform a more targeted approach in the subsequent phase. A variety of communication tactics were used to promote the program and target WDG's prenatal population using engaging content and appealing visuals. With an emphasis on social media promotions, tactics included geotargeted Meta (i.e., Facebook and Instagram) and Google advertisements, and a blog. Enhancements were made to the program website and online registration form to optimize program promotions and registration, and WDG Public Health continued to promote the program to local healthcare providers. This included outreach to Family Health Teams, midwives, birthing centres and community planning tables (e.g., Growing Great Generations, Dufferin Coalition for Kids).

All advertisements included visuals and messaging that reflected the objectives of the campaign, such as encouraging program registration as early in pregnancy as possible and creating an advertisement specific to younger parents.

Messaging also promoted several benefits of the program, including that it is free, can be completed at home at one's own pace and can help build parents' confidence about the journey ahead.

Sample advertisements used in the communications campaign:



**Figure 1.** Pregnancy Announcement



**Figure 2.** Embrace Parenthood



**Figure 3.** Seeing Double?



**Figure 4.** Prepare on your Time

## Communications Campaign Outcomes

To evaluate the campaign, the project team used a combination of social media analytics and program registration data. The registration form collected voluntary information on participant location, age, pregnancy status and how they learned about the program. Table 1 summarizes the number of registrations since the program launched in 2019.

**Table 1.** Online Prenatal and New Parent Program Registrations

Year	Number of Registrants
2019	578
2020	710
2021	652
2022	518
2023	646
2024	989

While registrations have fluctuated since the program's launch in 2019, the 2024 campaign contributed to the program's highest reported number of participants with 989 registrations. Compared to 2022 data, this was a 91% increase in program registration, well surpassing the campaign objective of a 25% increase from the 2022 program year.<sup>3</sup>

When examining participant demographics, the campaign was not only successful at reaching local prenatal populations across all age groups, geographies and stages of pregnancy, but was also effective at targeting priority groups such as those under the age of 25 years and those in their first trimester.

### **Age**

The highest levels of 2024 program registration were among those in the 30 to 34 year age group (38%), while the lowest levels of registration were among participants in the 18 to 24 age group (6%) and those under the age of 18 years (<1%).<sup>3</sup> Although research has found that, across Ontario, rates of prenatal education participation are lowest among those under the age of 25 years, WDG Public Health's prenatal education participation rates among this age group are consistent with local birth trends.<sup>1</sup> For example, according to BORN, WDG residents aged 18 to 24 years represented 7% of those who gave birth in 2024 and also accounted for 7% of those who participated in prenatal education.<sup>4</sup> This means that WDG Public Health's prenatal program is being proportionately accessed by pregnant individuals and families under the age of 25 years.

### **Geography**

To effectively target WDG's prenatal population, the campaign used geotargeted advertisements. Different geographic radius settings were used across the first three phases of the campaign (no advertisements were implemented in Phase 4). Table 2 summarises program registrations by location across the four campaign phases. During the first three phases of the campaign, geotargeting strategies were adjusted to reduce program registrations among non-WDG residents. As a result, registrations among non-WDG residents decreased from 24% in Phase 1 to 10% in Phase 2. When no advertisements were used in Phase 4, the percentage of non-WDG registrants increased slightly from 13% to 18%.<sup>3</sup> This confirms that geotargeted advertisements are an effective strategy to specifically target WDG's prenatal population. Furthermore, Phase 4 experienced the lowest number of program registrations (181 registrants compared to an average of 246 registrants across Phases 1 through 3),<sup>3</sup> validating the use of online promotions as an effective strategy to increase program awareness.

**Table 2.** Online Prenatal and New Parent Program registrations by WDG region and by communication campaign phases

Region	Phase 1 Jan-Feb	Phase 2 Mar-May*	Phase 3 July-Sept	Phase 4 Oct-Dec*	Total for 2024
Wellington	16%	25%	23%	22%	21%
Dufferin	17%	22%	21%	21%	21%
Guelph	43%	43%	44%	40%	43%
Other Region	24%	10%	13%	18%	16%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

*\*No digital advertisements were implemented in the month of June or in Phase 4 to permit the project team to evaluate the impact of earlier phases of the campaign.*

Program registration was highest among Guelph residents (43%), while participants from Wellington County and Dufferin County each represented 21% of registrants.<sup>3</sup> This is consistent with local birth trends according to BORN. For example, the proportion of WDG residents who gave birth in 2024 and reside in Guelph was 45% followed by Wellington County (29%) and Dufferin County (26%), and the proportion of WDG residents who gave birth and participated in prenatal education was 45% among Guelph residents, followed by 26% of Wellington County residents and 29% of Dufferin County residents.<sup>4</sup> As the program is available online at no-cost, 16% of participants reported living outside of the WDG region, mainly from surrounding health unit jurisdictions.<sup>3</sup>

### Pregnancy Status

The majority of program registrants identified as being pregnant (85%), and most reported being in their second (39%) or third trimester (28%) when registering for the program.<sup>3</sup> WDG Public Health was successful at increasing program registration among those in their first trimester, which increased from 15% in 2023 to 22% in 2024.<sup>3</sup> Most notably, registrations among those in their first trimester increased with each subsequent phase of the campaign. When no advertisements were promoted during Phase 4 of the campaign (October to December 2024), first trimester registrations decreased considerably from 28% in Phase 3 (July to September 2024) to 17% in Phase 4.<sup>3</sup> This confirms the effectiveness of the campaign's advertisements at reaching WDG's prenatal population in the early stages of pregnancy.

### Promotional Methods

Within WDG Public Health's prenatal program registration form, participants are asked how they learned about the program. Meta recruitment experienced the largest uptake across all promotional methods, increasing from 0% in 2023 to 20% in 2024.

Internet searches and WDG Public Health's website continued to be the most popular method participants learned about the program (47% in 2024), alongside recommendations from healthcare providers (27% in 2024).<sup>3</sup>

Throughout all phases of the campaign, the "Seeing Double" advertisement (Figure 3) was consistently the top performing ad, garnering a total of 52% of total ad click-throughs from Meta to the WDG Public Health website across all ads and phases. The success may be due to the ad's visual of a positive pregnancy test which clearly communicates the subject matter of the post and garners attention from people who may be currently or recently pregnant.

### **Program Feedback**

In addition to analyzing results from the communications campaign, WDG Public Health reviewed comments from program participants who completed the Online Prenatal and New Parent Program. In the program's evaluation survey, participants reported positive feedback about the program's content and structure. The following is a summary of participant comments:

- Participants liked that the program included honest views and real-life stories from mothers and partners.
- The program includes accurate information and visuals about labour, the postpartum process and breastfeeding.
- The program is very informative and useful.
- It covers a variety of topics (e.g., different labour strategies, preterm babies, postpartum recovery, diaper changing, safety tips) and the information is comprehensive.
- It includes links to local services and resources.
- It uses a variety of media and formats for different learning styles that keeps participants engaged (e.g., videos, quizzes, interactive activities).
- Participants said they loved being able to complete it at home on their own time and at their own pace.

### **Next Steps in 2025**

Based on the campaign evaluation, the project team will continue to build on the strengths of the social media strategy to further increase program awareness and participation among WDG's prenatal population in 2025. This includes the continued use of geotargeted Facebook and Instagram advertisements, using top performing ads, and including a variety of imagery and content to promote registration in the first trimester and to appeal to families under the age of 25 years.



The project team is also exploring new social media tactics to better reach WDG's prenatal population, including short videos and animations for social media platforms. The evaluation of 2025 communications tactics is ongoing to ensure that WDG Public Health continues to effectively reach its prenatal population across the WDG region, including priority age groups and stages of pregnancy.

## Health Equity Implications

Provincial research has identified that prenatal education participation is lower among several sociodemographic groups. Those less likely to participate include individuals under 25 years of age, those with lower education or income, individuals who are unemployed, newcomers and visible minorities.<sup>1</sup> WDG Public Health strives to promote its prenatal program to these groups in ways that enhance the accessibility of prenatal education. This includes offering the program at no cost to participants and providing it in a convenient format. Participants can access the program on any electronic device with an internet connection (e.g., computer, smart phone, tablet) and can complete the program at their own pace and in the comfort of their own home. All program promotions consider the diversity of WDG's prenatal population and include imagery and messaging that is inclusive.

## Conclusion

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Prenatal education is an integral part of supporting healthy pregnancies and contributing to positive health outcomes for both parent and baby.<sup>1</sup> WDG Public Health's Online Pregnancy and New Parent Program provides free and convenient access to evidence-based pregnancy, birth and parenting information to support future parents to build their confidence as they prepare for the journey ahead.

Despite the benefits of prenatal education, provincial prenatal education participation rates remain low.<sup>1</sup> In 2024, WDG Public Health implemented a communications campaign to raise awareness of its prenatal program and to increase program participation. Using geotargeted advertisements with engaging content and imagery, the Online Pregnancy and New Parent program experienced a 91% increase in program registrations between 2022 and 2024.<sup>3</sup> The campaign was also successful at reaching priority groups, such as those under the age of 25 years and those in their first trimester. WDG Public Health will continue to promote its prenatal program building on the strengths of the 2024 campaign and will continue to strive to increase rates of prenatal education participation among all WDG parents-to-be to support positive health outcomes for WDG's maternal and newborn populations.



## Ontario Public Health Standards

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### Foundational Standards

- ☐ Population Health Assessment
- ☐ Health Equity
- ☒ Effective Public Health Practice
- ☐ Emergency Management

### Program Standards

- ☐ Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- ☐ Food Safety
- ☐ Healthy Environments
- ☒ Healthy Growth and Development
- ☐ Immunization
- ☐ Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- ☐ Safe Water
- ☐ School Health
- ☐ Substance Use and Injury Prevention

## 2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

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More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- ☐ Improve health outcomes
- ☒ Focus on children's health
- ☐ Build strong partnerships
- ☐ Innovate our programs and services
- ☐ Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system

## References

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