



Beds and Britches, Etc. (B.A.B.E.)

Learning History

Organizations like ours try to learn from our experiences, both the successful and not so successful ones. This is a way of assessing our effectiveness and sharing information. It is an important process for the growth of any organization. In doing so, we have recorded some of our learning process around the concept of a “learning history.”

We went back to the source of the B.A.B.E. program – the people who created it, those who developed the concepts and formed the process for driving it, those who helped to implement and manage it, and those who participated. We tried to capture and convey the experience and insights of these people. The result of this new form of assessment, a Learning History, is put forth on the pages that follow. We believe that what we have learned will help you to develop and implement a successful B.A.B.E. program for your community or organization.

We hope that this learning history will help and encourage growth and development at whatever stage of life it finds your program. As B.A.B.E. has grown up, so have we, learning valuable lessons about our program and our community through the trials of time and the everyday.

Memorial Health System staff members are more than happy to answer any questions you have regarding this process. Please feel free to call us at (219)284-7115 for more information.

Phil Newbold
CEO, Memorial Hospital/Health System

Infant Stages

Beds and Britches, Etc. (B.A.B.E.), a unique “store” offering new and used baby clothing and equipment, was born from the work of a multitude of community members and organizations. The story of its growth from a small idea to a living, breathing thing is marked by a collection of influences that started work well before the opening of the first B.A.B.E. store in 1992.

In 1987 the Healthy Babies project was launched under the auspices of Memorial Health System, an initiative designed in part to bring a diverse group of people together to work on the issue of infant mortality in our community.

In 1989 the St. Joseph County infant mortality rates were 8.5 per 1000 births overall and 20.9 per 1000 births for non-white persons (ISDH). Carl Ellison, Vice President, Community Affairs at Memorial Hospital reported that an incentive for the Healthy Babies project was that infant mortality rates in St. Joseph County exceeded state and national goals. Indeed, in 1990 the infant mortality rate for the state was 9.6 per 1,000 births overall, while in St. Joseph County it was 11 per 1,000 live births (State and Metropolitan Area Data Book.).

Like all community issues, infant mortality reduction was linked to other complexities. “As we got into the infant mortality reduction area, we found a need to focus also on those babies that were *here*,” said Carl. A committee called Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies was formed and chaired by Julie Koza, Director of Healthy Babies. The committee was a grassroots effort to make a difference in the area of maternal and child health. In 1991, this committee, made up of nurses, social workers, and concerned citizens brought the B.A.B.E. program into the world.

Julie and others had investigated programs and models that focused on improving the early lives of children through family education and support. In the early nineties a small number of committee members, as well as other community leaders -- a

high school principal, social service representatives -- traveled to Rockford, Illinois to visit a program and gather ideas. It was there that they saw the principle of what would later become the B.A.B.E. program in action.

“There happened to be a couple young moms who were there,” Carl said. They were taking part in a “clothes closet” program where there were “a few miscellaneous items that the young women...could earn...They testified to how nice it was to be able to earn things for their baby, and you could see the pride, you could see the self-esteem, associated with that.”

The B.A.B.E. program became a more extensive version of this “closet” idea, always emphasizing family and customer self-esteem as the foundation of its mission statement. This principle continues today as a guide in all its development efforts.

The program works simply. Parents, and parents to be, earn B.A.B.E. coupons by keeping prenatal appointments, attending parenting classes, taking their child to get immunized, and a number of other activities that improve family health and child development. Physicians, clinics, and other social service “vendors” distribute the coupons to clients who can redeem them at B.A.B.E. stores for merchandise ranging from baby formula to cribs. The important part of this exchange is that customers come to the store with something they have earned themselves -- coupons -- and leave with something they are able to provide for their child -- a brand new stroller, diapers, or a handmade blanket.

“All that work you do when you have a baby,” one B.A.B.E. shopper and mother of two said, “being able to come here and get something you need makes you feel like you have something to show for it all. I really like it.”

Beds and Britches, Etc. (B.A.B.E.) Mission Statement

To provide quality new and used children's clothing and equipment...in a manner fostering responsibility and self-esteem. This voluntary committee has no political or religious affiliation; it is committed to the following goals:

1. To increase awareness and utilization of maternal, child and social services which may assist in achieving optimum pregnancy outcome and well-child health.
2. To promote pride, dignity, and self-esteem.
3. To encourage personal responsibility.
4. To leverage community volunteerism and support.

First Steps

The Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies committee soon joined efforts with another local hospital, St. Joseph of Mishawaka, and the Women's Care Center, a pregnancy testing center. The Women's Care Center already had a small clothes and supply closet to assist families who needed baby items, and by collaborating with the B.A.B.E. program, service duplication was avoided.

"No one wanted to be left out," described Julie Koza, amazed at the ease with which community partners appeared on the scene from the onset. The hospitals and other agencies involved let their employees donate time to setting up the B.A.B.E. program. The more community support increased, the more collaborators expressed their willingness and excitement to be involved. "Politics worked in our favor," Julie said, "Everyone wanted to make sure it was a community project."

The first B.A.B.E. store opened in Mishawaka in 1992, using space donated by the Women's Care

Center. Volunteers had cataloged and tagged merchandise based on a “shopping list” of baby items that most families would need or want. Vendors had been recruited well in advance of the opening to give them time to distribute B.A.B.E. coupons to clients, but still, Julie said, “We had no idea how many people would come in.” B.A.B.E. relies on coupon vendors to control the number of shoppers they see. A smooth operation is dependent on a reasonable number of people redeeming their coupons over time. “When we opened, we didn’t know how many coupons were out there floating around.”

Figuring out coupon numbers and distribution, shopper flow, stocking, and inventory, was a gradual process shaped by customer visits and requests that first year. In the very beginning, however, much of it was luck. Julie says they were clear with partners and the community from the beginning that glitches might arise that would have to be worked out together -- running out of baby items, having more coupons presented than they were able to redeem, or even little or no customer interest in the store. “But everything just fell into place,” she said.

Growth spurts

In its second year, B.A.B.E. grew by ten percent, “selling” 3,877 items. The third year, B.A.B.E. experienced a 43% increase in the number of people served. Saint Joseph’s Regional Medical Center sponsored a second store in 1993, which opened in South Bend. Based on the partnership already formed between the organization and B.A.B.E., this store also operated out of a Women’s Care Center.

In March of this same year, Memorial Hospital granted funds for a part-time coordinator and administrative support, eventually adding a full-time program assistant in 1996. Other funding came from private donations, service clubs, foundations and fundraising.

By the time a third store opened in South Bend in April of 1997, over 85 doctors, clinics, and social service agencies served as B.A.B.E. coupon vendors. Not only had new stores appeared, but more and more segments of the community were a part of the B.A.B.E. program, distributing coupons and using the B.A.B.E. stores as incentives for their clients. “One of the biggest successes I thought,” said Julie, “was that WIC

breast-feeding classes became full when people found out they could get [B.A.B.E.] coupons.”

Indeed, attendance at nutrition and breast-feeding classes sponsored by WIC increased by fifty percent, Patti Meuninck, WIC Clinic Nutrition Supervisor in Mishawaka, verified. “I was here when the program started,” Patti said, “It was phenomenal how much word of mouth spread...It definitely made a difference.”

In this way, B.A.B.E. supported other community programs, encouraging women and families to seek educational opportunities, decreasing the number of doctor and clinic appointments missed at offices that distributed coupons, and ultimately contributing to the health of children in our community.

In 1998 alone, over 1,600 families made “purchases” at B.A.B.E. of St. Joseph County stores, for a total of 7,873 coupons redeemed. Eighty-five coupon distributors continue to participate in the program today, a number Judy admits may be too many for the most efficient coordination. WIC distributes the largest number of B.A.B.E. coupons of these vendors, followed by a family practice, a prenatal clinic, and two other local family health centers.

Our community has not been the only area to benefit from the growth of the B.A.B.E. program. In 1993, with the help of the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies committee, Fort Wayne opened A Baby’s Closet (ABC), and Evansville soon followed suit. Neighboring Elkhart County opened their B.A.B.E. store in

December of 1994 with strong volunteer support from the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Committee of St. Joseph County. Indianapolis was the first to bring the B.A.B.E. project to an urban setting, opening at least three stores since June of 1996. The establishment of the B.A.B.E. Network of Indiana, and the development of similar programs in other states, has increased the B.A.B.E. family tremendously.

Forming An Identity

Early on, and throughout the growth of the B.A.B.E. program, education played an important role in the identity of the program, for family customers, and also for the community at-large. Families earn coupons by participating in activities that encourage learning, and healthy behavior, but they also receive education in the B.A.B.E. stores. One of the only programs in the area to teach car seat safety, B.A.B.E. customers get a

one-on-one training about use and safety before they leave with their car seat. Other items available at B.A.B.E. stores come with appropriate education: crib buyers learn about set-up and use, and how to keep a young baby on its back while sleeping; walker and stroller customers learn how to keep their children comfortable, secure, and in safe areas while they are restrained.

Judy Decker, program coordinator, recognizes the difficulties a shopper at any kind of store might encounter when faced with complex instruction manuals, language, or education barriers. Yet children's safety depends on equipment restraints and other parts that must work and be used properly. B.A.B.E. customers are always made aware of these concerns and shown practices to minimize them with every purchase. In the summer of 1999, the B.A.B.E. program anticipates the opening of a fourth store that will have more space and resources than existing stores to offer even more educational services.

"We really do offer a lot of training and education that our customers aren't going to get anywhere else," said Judy, "And that's what our program is all about."

This education extends to the larger community as well, as B.A.B.E. presentations and awareness events add to the program's visibility and local support. Over 100 people came to a walker trade-in, where they exchanged wheeled walkers of their own for safer, stationary exersaucers. Working with a radio station, B.A.B.E. offered a car seat use and safety promotion that drew in families who had children without seats to come in and pick them up for free.

Community partners themselves initiate visibility and support as a result. While B.A.B.E. dispensed car seats and walkers at these events, they also received contributions. In fact, a downtown lawyer who saw the event taking place, offered to contribute 30 stationary walkers as the program ran out of supplies. Community, B.A.B.E. customers, and the program itself, all take the initiative in ensuring B.A.B.E.'s success. Most recently, a local restaurant raised over \$2,000 for B.A.B.E. through donating a portion of all its gift certificate sales.

B.A.B.E.'s largest event is the program's annual fundraiser, a diapering duel in the fall that brings in hundreds of supporters to cheer on community leaders as they race to see who can diaper a baby doll fastest. Competitors must maintain a bond with their "child" at all times during the diapering, and fans buy tickets to watch such talents. Past competitors have included a police lieutenant, bank president, and other prominent community members with hidden diapering skills. Last year's event brought in 300 people and

\$15,000, money which is used primarily to stock the stores.

Perhaps the most critical component of B.A.B.E.'s identity however, has been a relentless commitment to making the program locations "real stores." Judy Decker described the outcome: "When our customers come to a B.A.B.E. store, we want them to feel like they are shopping in a first class baby store. The stores are nicely decorated and we offer quality customer service."

A trip to any B.A.B.E. store confirms it. Decorated with children's wallpaper, framed baby pictures and stuffed animals, they are cozy and attractive. All clothes are hung and tagged, and additional merchandised is displayed on uniform shelving level with customers. Bea Maefield, program assistant, keeps the stores well stocked while assisting customers. New pastel baby blankets, crocheted and donated by a volunteer, are lined up with other items, and carefully handmade outfits contributed by a sewing club every year, are among just some of the clothes to be found there.

"We look like a store, we operate like a store...We want [customers] to feel that when they come into the store they've earned this coupon – it's money to them," said Judy, "We act like clerks, we don't act like social workers...We're privileged to have them come and shop at our store. And the relationship that we acquire from treating them that way helps build their self-esteem, and make them feel like this isn't a give-away."

And it's not, as customers are quick to point out.

The "Real World"

"Ain't nothing free in this world," said Denise Smith, a B.A.B.E. customer, "...In fact, you start talking about free, and people want you to shut up...Everybody has to work."

Denise ought to know. Mother of six children that range in age from two to sixteen, Denise has been stopping in at B.A.B.E. stores for years. She believes the coupon system is an effective method of getting families things they need, and that because people must earn their coupons, the program is fair.

There is no income restriction for the B.A.B.E. program. Theoretically, anyone who goes to a vendor

agency and participates in activities that earn coupons may redeem them. “Anybody that needs an incentive can earn a coupon -- people who are practicing healthy behaviors,” said Judy.

However, the large majority of coupon distributors work with a low-income population, and that’s the most important determiner of B.A.B.E. customers. Program staff agree that in general B.A.B.E. reaches a population that seems to need and want what the program has to offer. And because the program is not limited to serving only a certain income level, it may be easier to avoid stigmas about what kind of program it is, concentrating on education and healthy family development -- things that are important for everyone in the community, regardless of income.

“I think it helps out,” a B.A.B.E. customer said, about the Chapin Street store she visits, “I’m a single mom and I think a lot of people are...It’s very helpful to people in the community who struggle. It gives an incentive to improve.”

Other single moms agreed, citing the difficulty of getting a house ready for a baby on your own. They recognize too, the challenge of being prepared in other ways.

“When I was pregnant, I was terrified I wasn’t going to be a good mom,” said Susan Kapsa, B.A.B.E. customer, “[Program assistant] Bea is such a big help. If I’m not sure what I need, someone’s been here to help...and they teach you how to care for the baby and offer support if you need it.”

“We are starting to see more men,” said Bea, but the majority of B.A.B.E. customers remain women. Still, as the real world changes, so does parenting, and the B.A.B.E. program may be the first to say that the project may never finish growing up.

Growing Pains

Growth is always exciting, but also an organizational consideration. From our experience with the B.A.B.E. program, several areas were considerations that needed attention as we became larger. Keeping these issues in mind might give you the structure you need to grow right into!

Staying stocked. Obviously, redeeming coupons requires baby items that are high quality, safe, and there. As the number of B.A.B.E. shoppers increases, so must merchandise. Community education about B.A.B.E. and store items can be raised together. The B.A.B.E. program goes to service clubs, church, or other community groups to talk about what the program has accomplished and how it has evolved. The price for such a presentation? Everyone attending is asked to bring an item that can be “sold” at a B.A.B.E. store.

Making space -- storage. Keeping store items that might not be on the shelves right away means that space is important. Things that move quickly, especially if they're large -- bassinets, car seats, strollers -- need to be restocked often and available. Many stores just simply might not have the space, and warehouse or extra storage space is necessary.

Accepting trade-ins. In the past, B.A.B.E. stores offered shoppers coupons in exchange for used baby clothes or items they brought in. As more B.A.B.E. families brought trade-ins, it was difficult to organize and standardize the process, plus many items required repair or extra attention. Every program should make their own trade-in policy based on what works for them, but with growth, trade-ins may become numerous, time-consuming, and not always be something that "sells."

Coordinating coupon distributors. Every B.A.B.E. coupon distributor, or "vendor," must have an accurate idea of how the program works. These important partners are usually a shopper's first introduction to how the program works. All vendors are required to let the B.A.B.E. program know what their clients can do to receive coupons, and then distribute coupons accordingly. New employees, staff turnover and other organizational change can impact whether families who might benefit from the B.A.B.E. program receive information about what it can offer them. Keeping coupon distributors aware and a part of the program is a hefty task that increases as new vendors are added. "More isn't better," said Judy Decker, current B.A.B.E. program coordinator. Keeping vendor numbers under thirty allows more effective partnerships to form between the program and its coupon distributors.

Prioritizing incentives. Patti Meuninck, WIC Clinic Nutrition Supervisor, explained that as a vendor it was important for their organization to use the coupons as effectively as they could. Clients couldn't earn coupons simply for keeping regular appointments, where they received food vouchers through WIC. For B.A.B.E. coupons, clients go "above and beyond," learning something new in a class about breastfeeding or nutrition – "anything extra beyond what is required to be on WIC. That way we feel like we're actually using the coupons as an incentive."