

Inspiring Healthy Futures Submission to the Health Committee's Child Health Study

Inspiring Healthy Futures, a cross-sector collaboration of 1,500 individuals and organizations who champion children's health and well-being, is pleased to submit to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health's study of children's health.

Children and youth have suffered tremendously throughout the pandemic, but the state of children's health and well-being was worsening long prior to the emergence of COVID-19. In fact, the pre-pandemic 2020 UNICEF Report Card concluded that, though Canada ranked among the countries with the best economic, environmental and social conditions for growing up, it was ranked 30th out of 38 wealthy countries in the health and well-being of its children.

As the pandemic unfolded, it became clear that children, youth and families were being affected in unpredictable and enduring ways. Recognizing the transformative chance to create better outcomes for children and youth, CIHR Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health (IHDCYH), Children's Healthcare Canada, UNICEF Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada came together to design a pan-Canadian, cross-sector initiative to measurably improve the health and well-being of children, youth and families.

Between September 2020 and March 2021, consultations were conducted, convening youth, parents, researchers, healthcare leaders, educators, advocates, policymakers, service providers, community and business leaders and others.

The consultations revealed, resoundingly, that this moment of crisis offered an unmissable opportunity for action that should be guided by a commitment to interdependence, equity, collaboration, and youth and family participation. By committing to these four themes, Canada can better address the interdependent web of factors that contribute to the health and well-being of children. Simply put, the piecemeal approach that Canada has taken to address child health and well-being has not worked, and will not work.

Following nine months of consultation and engagement, participants in the *Inspiring Healthy Futures* initiative identified five interlinked actionable priorities that are essential to creating better outcomes for children, youth and families. These priorities should guide research, policy, and community action to create better health and well-being systems and local networks. More importantly, these priorities should guide the development of a comprehensive, pan-Canadian child health strategy.

Primary Recommendation: That the Standing Committee on Health call on the Minister of Health to develop a comprehensive, pan-Canadian child health strategy.

Interlinked Action Priorities to Create Systemic Change

There already exists a wealth of knowledge in Canada regarding how to foster healthy children, youth and families. The development of a national strategy should therefore focus on mobilizing that existing knowledge and collaborating to identify new ways to turn research, innovation and promising ideas into policy and action.

In the practical sense, budgets, policies, systems, research and programs tend to be fragmented while the lives and health of children tend to be multidimensional. To have a meaningful impact on children's health outcomes, we must then work within an interwoven system of knowledge, community, healthcare, social services, education, and justice. This is the action framework, which consists of five interconnected priorities:

Mobilized Communities Around Children, Youth and Families

At the centre of the action framework are *mobilized communities*. Spanning youth initiatives, research collaborations, grassroots parent groups, advocacy initiatives and community and industry partnerships, these active, robust, empowered groups would translate the ideas and knowledge of different stakeholders into action. With child, youth and family voices at the centre, opportunities would be created for all stakeholders concerned with the well-being of children, youth and families to connect, collaborate, build relationships, share resources and knowledge, and mobilize toward change.

Recommendations

1. Create a National Child, Youth and Family Hub to connect a community of care spanning research, policy, systems, advocacy and services around children, youth and their families.
2. Mobilize community action around child, youth and family-oriented needs for COVID-19 recovery, including child, youth and parent/caregiver mental health.
3. Build child, youth and family capacity to initiate and participate in change leadership and service co-design, and adult capacity to act as allies to diverse youth.
4. Empower children, youth and families by involving them in decision-making.

Impactful Research and Knowledge

Research must be recognized as a critical part of the ecosystem for family and child health and well-being. For Canadians to be engaged in and see and feel the impact of health research from pre-conception through to later life, evidence must be integrated seamlessly into Canadian policy and practice.

To achieve this, we need guiding research strategies across the full continuum of research from biomedical to translational, with lifecycle, cross-disciplinary, and equity lenses applied.

Recommendations

1. Develop a lifecycle approach to understanding health and well-being from pre-conception through to later life.

2. Work in partnership to identify the most pressing health concerns, and address them through new knowledge generation from “bench to neighbourhood.”
3. Accelerate mobilization of knowledge to policy, practice and health promotion, empowering Canadians to make evidence-informed decisions.
4. Develop a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary approach to understanding and mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on health, education, well-being and social development; family finances; at-risk and transitional youth; and learning and development, and how to support equitable solutions for recovery.
5. Develop a comprehensive open, accessible data strategy across research communities.
6. Develop sustainable approaches for the equitable integration of youth, child and family voices into the research agenda.
7. In partnership with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, develop evidence and guidelines for health, education and social services that reflect cultural needs.
8. Support sustainable and equitable career pathways for researchers to build capacity for research time, and incentivize inter-disciplinary ways of delivering on health research impact.

Child-Friendly Policies and Structures

Every policy and decision made by government, communities and institutions should have a child, youth and family lens, and decision-makers will work together across jurisdictions, departments and other spheres of influence.

Recommendations

1. Increase the will and capacity of governments and other authorities to incorporate child-friendly decision-making protocols and practices.
2. Establish a non-partisan federal accountability office for and with children and youth, guided by the voices of children and youth and fully respecting and advancing the rights and self-determination of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and youth.
3. Ensure the right of every child, youth and family to access high-speed internet.
4. Introduce the Canada Youth Guarantee, so every youth is provided with support to reconnect with school and recover learning; every youth in transition is assured a place in post-secondary education, training or employment until the pre-pandemic rate of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET rate) is achieved; and youth in care have broad and flexible transitional supports.
5. Increase the Canada Child Benefit to ensure no child falls below the poverty line and reform the system of child benefits to increase equity, access and flexibility, particularly for families with disabilities and/or medically complex needs.
6. Provide universal pre-natal income support and parental leave for every child in the first year of life and a flexible program of leave through childhood.

Schools and Communities as Health and Well-Being Hubs

To facilitate the deployment of a pan-Canadian child health strategy, schools and communities can play an active role as dynamic hubs to connect parents, children and youth to the resources, outdoor and recreational space and social connection they need for health and well-being.

Recommendations

1. Recognize the role of schools as “child and youth development centres,” ensuring that every child has access to child care, quality early learning, developmental and social care, and access to necessary diagnoses, therapy and early intervention, and that parents are fully engaged as partners and peer supports.
2. Ensure every child has access to a free, healthy meal every school day.
3. Build capacity among educators and service providers for authentic understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit worldviews, anti-oppression practices and anti-racism.
4. Provide culturally responsive mental health (psychosocial) “first aid” training to every teacher, youth service provider and parent.
5. Create opportunities for schools as incubators of youth-led change initiatives.
6. Launch the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative to foster child-centred local governance and create community space for well-being and connection.
7. Mobilize local advocacy and private/public partnerships for equitable access to land and the natural environment, free play, and recreation and arts initiatives.
8. Increase investment in networked, culturally appropriate family resource programs to expand early child development, child health, parenting support and future-planning programs including education, career and financial planning.

Accessible, Adaptable Health and Well-Being Systems

All children, youth and families deserve timely, simple access to an integrated, family-centred system of physical and mental health-related services and benefits, flexible to the family’s needs.

Recommendations

1. Ensure every First Nations, Métis and Inuit child, youth and family has a stable and sustainable community source of clean water by the end of 2021.
2. Adapt a consistent approach to health where the child’s physical and mental health needs are delivered through a fully integrated system of care regardless of where the service is being delivered.
3. Ensure timely and appropriate access to child and youth mental health services, child development services, and services for children, youth and families with disabilities and medical complexities, delivered close to home and fully funded through the health system.
4. Work in full partnership with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities on health programs, practices and guidelines that meet cultural needs and respect sovereignty.

5. Create an integrated health and social service record, accessible to parents and health service providers, with de-identified data made available to researchers.
6. Develop and implement a consistent and comprehensive data set to be collected wherever the service is delivered, comparable across jurisdictions, to measure children's health, healthcare and health outcomes, with linkages to education and other key data.
7. Evaluate the implementation of and outcomes associated with the rapid roll out of virtual delivery of health services. Identify opportunities to further expand access to evidence-based, appropriate virtual health services for children, youth and families.
8. Ensure all children and youth have access to approved safe and effective medications through a national pharmacare strategy that mandates universal, portable and comprehensive drug coverage.
9. Fully fund and implement Jordan's Principle and the Spirit Bear plan.
10. Continue to invest in precision and personalized health innovation related to childhood rare diseases and other research priorities.

The Time Is Now

Every day in the life of a child matters.

Even prior to the pandemic, Canada began lagging behind its international counterparts when it came to child and youth health and well-being. Among the metrics identified in UNICEF Report Card 16, Canada:

- Ranked 30th in child well-being out of 38 of the world's richest countries,
- Had one of the highest adolescent suicide rates,
- Experienced 1 in 5 children living in a household below the poverty line, and
- Lacked basic reading and math skills in 1 in 3 youth by age 15.

To embrace the status quo means failing our children. To change that, leaders need to act.

Taking action means understanding and rectifying the impact of the pandemic on children, youth and families. It means taking this opportunity to "rewrite the rules" for policy, investment, innovation and partnerships that support all children, youth and families so they can thrive. It means working together in new, unrelenting ways to create a more integrated and decolonized system of health, social services and social protection.

Taking action now means securing our future and contributing to a sustainable, and equitable, COVID recovery.

Taking action means coming together to develop a comprehensive, pan-Canadian child health strategy.

Lisa Wolff Gaudet

About Us:

Inspiring Healthy Futures, a cross-sector initiative led by Children's Healthcare Canada, the Pediatric Chairs of Canada, UNICEF Canada, and the CIHR Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health (IHDCYH) is a launching point for mobilizing committed, passionate communities in a shared mission.

Between September 2020 and March 2021, *Inspiring Healthy Futures* engaged a diverse group of over 1,500 youth, parents, service providers, youth-serving agencies, cross-sector experts and researchers, and others to measurably improve the health and well-being of Canadian children and youth.