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Early Childhood Development

Supporting the Early Years in Nova Scotia

A Position Statement developed with the assistance of PHANS' Early Childhood Working Group

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Nova Scotia's Children

The most critical phase of human development is early childhood – the period from conception to school entry. A healthy start in life gives each child an equitable chance to thrive and grow into an adult who enjoys life and makes a positive contribution to society. The following is a snap shot of the circumstances of our children:

- 7.9% or 14,000 of Nova Scotia children live in poverty. Aboriginal children, racially visible children and children of immigrant families are at a three-fold risk or higher of living in poverty.ⁱ
- Youth and children under 18 years of age represented 31.5% of Nova Scotia food bank recipients in 2011ⁱⁱ.
- In Canada, approximately 28% of kindergarten children (at age 5 years) are considered vulnerable in terms of school readiness.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Children from low socioeconomic status families are at highest risk of vulnerability;¹ however, the majority of vulnerable children entering school are from middle class families.^{iv}
- Children who are vulnerable upon school entry are less likely to be job ready when entering the work force.^v
- Work trends are towards rotating shifts, weekends, evenings and nights with negative consequences for individual and family well-being. Those experiencing the greatest time crunch are single individuals with young children. A higher proportion of women than men provide care to ailing seniors thus impacting family time with young children.^{vi}

What the science tells us

The science of early childhood development is strong and growing. It is no longer debated! Why does policy and practice lag behind? The child's early experiences and immediate environment from conception to age six have the most important influence of any other time in the life cycle.^{vii} The science of early child development shows that brain development is highly sensitive to external influences in early childhood starting in utero with life-long effects."^{viii}

The early years set the trajectories for:

Health – coping, emotional control, habitual ways of responding, behaviours

Future health issues – chronic disease, obesity, addictions, mental health

Educational attainment – competence in literacy and numeracy

¹ As defined by Clyde Hertzman: Children are behind where we would like them to be in their development in one or more of these domains: Physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, communication skills and general knowledge.

Crime and the justice system – potential later involvement; the early years are key to prevention and intervention of aggression/violent behaviours.^{ix}

Recommended interventions in Early Childhood

The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on *The State of Public Health in Canada 2009: Growing up Well – Priorities for a Healthy Future*, recommends three types of interventions that are making a difference in terms of addressing inequities for children:

1. Broad poverty strategies
2. Broad family and children's policy and strategies
3. Supports for families and children

1. Poverty

Poverty is the single most significant determinant of the health status of children. Poverty is a multi-faceted, multi-layered, complex issue facing families, businesses, immigration strategies, communities, policy makers, the economy and the Government.

Children are one of the many faces of poverty. Children who experience persistent poverty are at even greater risk for experiencing adverse health outcomes such as deficits in cognitive and socio-emotional development,^x than children who experience sporadic and/or short-term poverty.

Addressing the issue of poverty in relation to enhancing healthy child development calls for actions that strengthen parents' and families' access to adequate income, food security, safe affordable housing, employment opportunities, training and post-secondary education, and quality health and social programs.^{xi}

2. Policy

Government leadership is required to change the conditions of success for children and families. Government leadership has had an impressive impact on issues such as immunization, tobacco control and seat belt/car seat safety. Investments in early childhood, supportive environments, and families, will require a shift in public policy initiatives across government departments and will lead to major improvements in health and economics (productivity) of the population.

From the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, there is international consensus that the most cost effective human capital interventions occur in early childhood. The return on investment in early childhood exceeds investment in any other stage of human development – benefits to cost ratio = 6:1 return on investment.^{xii}

Modern smart family policy^{xiii} supports children, families and strong economies; however, family policy in Nova Scotia lags behind the needs and realities of families. A comprehensive family policy would include a focus on the impacts on family time and would include labour standards, maternity and parental leave and a framework for early childhood development.

Nova Scotia must move forward with accessible and affordable **quality child care** to meet the current realities and changing needs of families. Quality child care will allow parents to return to work or engage in training to improve their knowledge and skills, thus enabling participation in the provincial workforce and contribution to the tax base.

Implementing the **Early Development Instrument (EDI)** in all communities in Nova Scotia could provide a critical step in understanding how well our children are doing now and over time. Implementation of the EDI is a key recommendation of the Nova Scotia Strategy for Children and Youth as a component of a solid foundation for children and families.^{xiv}

3. Supports for Families and Children

▪ Sensitive, responsive parenting

Sensitive, responsive parenting is the single most important benefit children can receive during their early years. Evidence has shown that by enriching the environment that children are born into, particularly disadvantaged families; it is possible to offset the effects of adverse environments that harm children. High-quality early interventions promote schooling, reduce crime, reduce teenage pregnancy, foster workforce productivity and promote adult health through multiple channels.^{xv}

Children need good quality care from the moment they get up in the morning until the time that they go to bed at night. There are two ways to provide that care. One way is to strengthen families; the other way is to provide substitute care outside the family. The two can go together quite nicely, but if you have one without the other, you have missed a big part of the child's day.^{xvi}

There are no quick fixes. Families need intensive, meaningful services of substantial duration in order to reap significant benefits. Universal approaches that include targeted programs value and benefit all children.

▪ Creating health supporting environments

Creating health supportive environments where children live, learn and play will help address emerging issues such as childhood obesity, unintentional injury and environmental health. Government leadership to address childhood obesity through the development and implementation of the Childhood Obesity Prevention Strategy, led by Department of Health and Wellness, is commendable.

Health supporting environments include reducing poverty (annual income), improving food security / adequate nutrition, participation in the workforce or meaningful employment, supporting children's growth and development (in particular brain development), supporting and educating parents and caregivers, education and child care (at home or child care centres), affordable housing, and improved access to health care.

▪ Coordination of services and programs

Coordination of services and programs is needed to move from fragmented, disconnected programs and services in Nova Scotia to a comprehensive, seamless and responsive early childhood system. As stated in the Nova Scotia Strategy for Children and Youth, Nova Scotians expect services to be planned and delivered in ways that make sense to them, not limited by departmental or organizational mandates.^{xvii}

Population Health Assessment and Surveillance

To improve the health and well-being of children in the early years, a deep understanding of this population is critical. Decision-making must be based on the best available information and include the existence and impact of inequalities/inequities. The collection and utilization of meaningful data and health status reports should inform policy, strategy and program development. There is still much to learn about the early years and research can help enhance knowledge and address gaps. Evaluation of new and existing policies, strategies and programs will help ensure the needs of young children and families are being met and will provide learnings to inform future directions.

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