



Backgrounder: Investing in Early Childhood

Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians summarizes the most current information we have on the health of Canadians and the factors that influence or “determine” health. It suggests several priority areas for action in the new millennium.

Highlights

- ◆ Experiences from conception to age 6 have the most important influence of any time in the life cycle on the connecting and sculpting of the brain’s neurons. Positive stimulation early in life improves learning, behaviour and health right into adulthood.
- ◆ A loving, secure attachment between parents, caregivers and babies in the first 18 months of life helps children develop trust, self-esteem, emotional control and the ability to have positive relationships with others in later life.
- ◆ Infants and children who are neglected or abused are denied the stimulation and nurturing they need in the early years. This puts them at higher risk for behavioural, social and learning problems throughout the life cycle.
- ◆ Readiness for school is an important indicator of developmental maturity and future success in school. In 1996–97, approximately 15% of preschoolers arrived at school with low cognitive scores; 14% had high scores in behavioural problems. Children from safe, more economically secure neighbourhoods and whose mothers had higher levels of education were most likely to have better scores.
- ◆ A healthy childhood begins before conception. Positive prenatal nutrition and other personal health practices, as well as social support to pregnant mothers, can help reduce low birthweight and other problems associated with birth. In 1996, 5.8% of all live births in Canada resulted in low birthweight babies (a total of 21,025 babies).
- ◆ Despite a parliamentary resolution in 1989 to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000, the number of young children who lived in low-income families increased from one in five in 1990 to one in four in 1995. These proportions are higher in Aboriginal and recently arrived immigrant communities, and in families headed by very young parents and women who are single parents.
- ◆ Children in low-income families and neighbourhoods are at higher risk than children who grow up in families with higher incomes for infant death and low birthweight. They are more likely to experience developmental delays and injuries, and to be exposed to environmental contaminants that have a negative effect on health.

- ◆ Research shows that even families with higher income sometimes have children who experience difficulties. The greatest **proportion** of children who experience difficulties are found in the bottom 20% of the socioeconomic scale. However, due to the large size of the middle-class in Canada, the **number** of children not doing as well as they might is greatest in the middle socioeconomic group.
- ◆ Many parents, especially mothers, are highly stressed by time pressures as they try to balance work and family responsibilities. Low wages, part-time work without benefits and shift work make it particularly difficult for young parents to spend time with their children and to obtain high-quality childcare when they are at work —without compromising their ability to provide the financial means required to support and raise healthy children.

Taking Action

With nurturing and consistent support in later years, many children can overcome early disadvantages. However, the preferred strategy is to prevent problems by providing all children with the social and physical environments they need to thrive. The majority of children and families, including those in the middle- and upper-income groups, could benefit from an integrated early child development strategy that includes increased economic security and parenting support. This strategy should build on existing policies and programs that involve parents, respect diversity and community autonomy, and have shown themselves to be successful.

Traditionally, communities, governments and the private sector have invested more time and money in the later years of childhood than they have in the first six years of life. Given the importance of this stage of development on future health and well-being, and the current time and economic pressures on young parents, we need to make at least the same investment in the early years.

Supporting optimal child development in the early years will require direct action by the health sector, as well as collaboration with other public sectors (e.g. education, social services and finance) and the many people and institutions that affect child development (e.g. families, schools, communities, workplaces, other governments and the media). Ensuring a continuum of early stimulation and learning opportunities will need to be coordinated with entry to school at the junior or senior kindergarten level.

Young children deserve to be loved, protected and valued for who they are. Over time, investing in our youngest citizens will also bring major benefits to Canadian society. We will be raising a healthy population that is optimally prepared to deal with the challenges of a global economy and a changing society in the new millennium.

For More Information

Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians was developed by the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health in collaboration with Health Canada, Statistics Canada, the Canadian Institute for Health Information and the Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto. The full text can be found on the Health Canada Web site: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca>. Printed copies of the *Report* are available from Provincial and Territorial Ministries of Health or from:

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