

## Chapter

# 4

## Social Environment

### Overview

The relationships we have in our lives — including the support we receive from our family, friends and community — are directly associated with general health. Effective responses to stress and the support of family and friends seem to act as buffers against health problems. Conversely, studies have shown that low levels of emotional support and low social participation have a negative effect on health and well-being.

Primary supports (family and friends) and secondary supports (school and community) contribute significantly to healthy child and adolescent development. Parents themselves need a supportive environment in which to raise their children. Support from family, friends and neighbours is important in helping parents to cope with the stress of raising children.

A safe and violence-free environment within which children and youth can live, learn and grow is crucial to their optimal development. However, a significant number of men, women and children in Canada live with violence or with the fear of violence. Child maltreatment and abuse have devastating long-term outcomes for children and serious social and economic costs for society.



## Relationship to Healthy Child Development

### *Strong family and social support protects children.*

Children's social support is determined by their experiences with parents and caregivers, how their family functions, the nature of their whole community, and other factors in the broader society.

It is widely recognized that children need a significant and continuous relationship with at least one caring adult. Other factors contribute to children's health and well-being, including adults setting high expectations and expressing belief in children's ability, and their acknowledgement of children as valued participants in the life and work of their school, family and community (Benard, 1991).

The impact of positive early nurturing carries on into later life. Children who have a solid base of emotional security created by the experience of sensitive and responsive early nurturing will be more likely to have strong and enduring personal relationships later in life (Guy, 1997, p. 66).

### *Poor social support has negative consequences.*

Just as strong support networks contribute to healthy child development, inadequate social support for children and their families is potentially very damaging. For example, children with a troubled home life in which supportive, caring relationships are lacking may suffer the consequences of poor social knowledge. In turn, these children may have difficulties maintaining stable and fulfilling relationships with others (Guy, 1997, pp. 64–65).

### *Schools and community play a role.*

Secondary support networks include the school and community, which provide support for children and their families, leisure and cultural activities, and safe and nurturing environments. Children's participation in school and community activities is important. Children who have the opportunity to take part in a wide variety of activities and programs are more likely to view themselves as capable human beings and will seek out additional challenges (Guy, 1997, p. 86).

Children's intellectual growth is stimulated by their relationships with the adults who guide their learning. A long-term mentoring relationship with at least one successful adult is also beneficial for healthy development (Werner and Smith, 1982).



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### *Fear and violence have a negative impact on children.*

Fear and violence in children's wider social environment have a significant influence on their health and well-being. Children are at risk of developing serious problems when they witness violence or are direct victims of abuse. Resulting physical, emotional and developmental problems can last a lifetime (Statistics Canada, 1997a, p. 2).

Among all forms of maltreatment, witnessing spousal violence appears to have the strongest influence on young people's subsequent risk behaviours, including substance abuse and criminal behaviour (Manion and Wilson, 1995, pp. 28–29). Family violence, school difficulties, impoverished communities and high rates of youth unemployment have been cited by the National Crime Prevention Council as underlying risk factors for delinquency (CCSD, 1997, p. 23). The most common form of family violence — including both physical violence and verbal abuse (e.g. teasing, name calling and isolation) — is between siblings (CCSD, 1997, pp. 42–43).

The values and norms of the broader society have a profound influence on the physical, mental, spiritual, social and economic health and well-being of children and adults alike. By extension, the services and policies that reflect norms and values related to issues such as culture and ethnicity, the place of women in society, and the importance placed on children and families, all have an impact on children's health (Health Canada, 1996a, pp. 15–16).



## Conditions and Trends

### Parenting and Family Functioning (or Love and Emotional Support)

A key requisite for healthy child development is attachment to an adult who consistently provides direction, understanding and support. According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), in 1994–95, most children aged 2 to 11 had fairly positive interactions with their parents and received consistent parenting (Ross, Scott and Kelly, 1996, p. 39).

In a study of 10- and 11-year-olds in step-families, the NLSCY found that while the majority of step-children reported moderate to good experiences, approximately 33% of children felt they lacked emotional support from their parents. Only 27% of children in intact families that comprise the birth parents felt this way (Cheal, 1996, p. 98). See **Exhibit 4.1**.

There are indications that many children and youth are looking to sources outside their family for help. For example, an average of 3,000 children and youth per day call the Kids Help Phone, a national 24-hour counselling service (CCSD, 1997, p. 10).



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## 4.1

## Selected residential parenting arrangements and negative perceptions of family life of children 10 to 11 years old, Canada, 1994–95

	Lack of emotional support	Erratic punishment	Difficult family relationships
Biological <sup>a</sup> mother and biological father	26.8%	33.1%	28.1%
Biological mother and no father	30.2%	34.2%	60.7%
Biological mother and step-father	33.8%	49.9%	45.2%

a. Biological parents include adoptive parents.

Source: Adapted from D. Cheal (1996). "Stories About Step-families." In *Growing Up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. Catalogue No. 89-550-MPE, No. 1. Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada, p. 98.

### Family Structure

While the dominant family structure remains married couples with children, Canadian families are more diverse than ever before. The result is that children today face a complex world of new social relationships — custodial and non-custodial parents, step-parents, members of common-law relationships, full siblings, half siblings and step-siblings (CCSD, 1996, p. 14).

#### *Most children live in families with married parents.*

In 1994–95, most (84.2%) children lived in families with two parents (Ross, Scott and Kelly, 1996, p. 29). See **Exhibit 4.2**. While divorce rates have dropped since reaching an all-time high in 1987, current rates are significantly higher today than they were a generation ago. The number of divorces per 100,000 people increased from 54.8 in 1967 to 273.9 in 1991 (Richardson, 1996, p. 229); in 1994, the rate declined slightly to 269.7 (Statistics Canada, 1996a, p. 4). Legal frameworks for divorce have changed significantly in recent years, and statistics on family formation and dissolution were not necessarily reliable in the past when separations and common-law unions were underreported.

#### *There are more common-law families.*

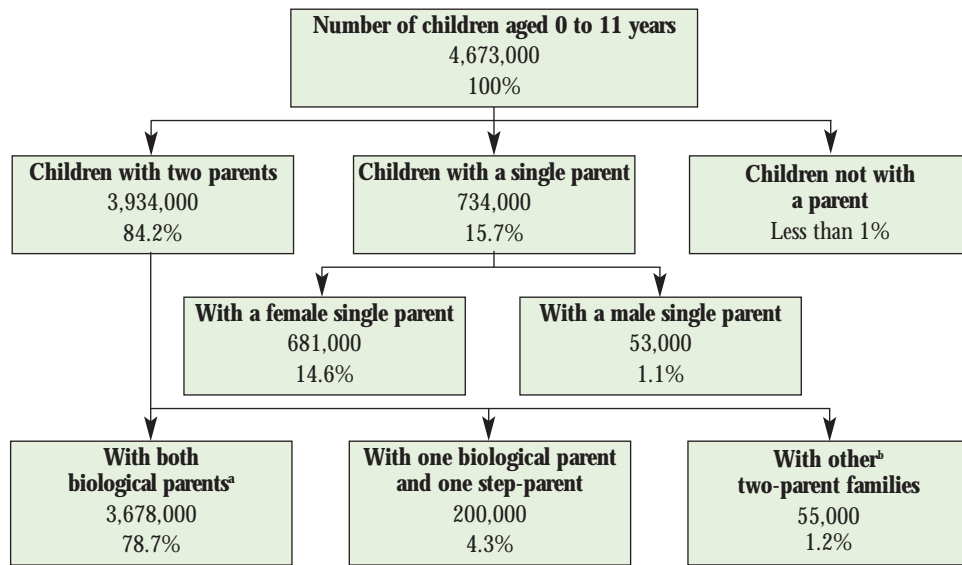
The percentage of families that include common-law spouses in Canada doubled between 1981 and 1995, from 6% to 12%. Roughly half of these families include children (CCSD, 1996, p. 13).

The NLSCY data suggest that common-law unions provide a less stable family environment for children than marriages. In 1994–95, 63% of 10-year-olds with parents living in a common-law union had seen their parents separate, compared with only 14% of children whose parents were married and had not previously lived in common (Statistics Canada, 1998a).

#### ***Kids with Teen Moms***

*Contrary to popular perception, a relatively small proportion of teens in Canada are having babies. In 1994, less than 1% of all Canadian children lived with a teen mother (CCSD, 1997, p. 13).*

## 4.2 Distribution of children aged 0 to 11 by family type, Canada, 1994–95



a. Includes 182,000 children living with step-siblings.

b. Includes children with two adoptive parents, one biological and one adoptive parent, two foster parents, two step-parents, and one adoptive and one step-parent.

Source: Adapted from D.P. Ross, K. Scott and M.A. Kelly (1996). "Overview: Children in Canada in the 1990s." In *Growing Up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. Catalogue No. 89-550-MPE, No. 1. Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada, p. 29.

### *The number of step-families and lone-parent families is increasing.*

In 1994, approximately 9% of Canadian children under the age of 12 lived in a step-family, the majority of which were blended families, with both parents bringing children from a previous relationship into their current union (Statistics Canada, 1997b, p. 9).

Approximately 20% of all families with children were lone-parent families in 1996. The number of lone-parent families as a percentage of all families in Canada almost doubled between 1961 and 1991 (from 11% to 20%) (CCSD, 1996, p. 10). Eight out of 10 lone-parent families are headed by women (CCSD, 1997, p. 12).

### **Who Are Kids with Problems?**

*Results of the 1994–95 NLSCY show that most children with behavioural, academic or social problems are from dual-parent families. For example, almost three quarters (71.1%) of children with conduct disorders came from two-parent families, while 28.9% were from lone-mother families (Lipman, Offord and Dooley, 1996, p. 86). This split reflects family structure trends: most children live in dual-parent families.*



The proportion of lone-parent families is even higher among Aboriginal people. In 1996, 32% of Aboriginal children under the age of 15 living in Census families<sup>1</sup> were lone-parent families — twice the rate of the general population. See **Exhibit 4.3**. In urban areas, the rate was even higher at 46% (Statistics Canada, 1998b).

### *Most people have family responsibilities.*

A 1992 survey of more than 5,000 employees in eight Canadian workplaces revealed that 31% of respondents had caregiving responsibilities for dependents under 19 years of age, 20% had only elder care responsibilities, and 26% had responsibility for both child care and elder care. Fewer than one in four employees (23%) had neither child care nor elder care responsibilities (Work and Eldercare Research Group of CARNET, 1993, pp. 3–5).

### *Families are smaller.*

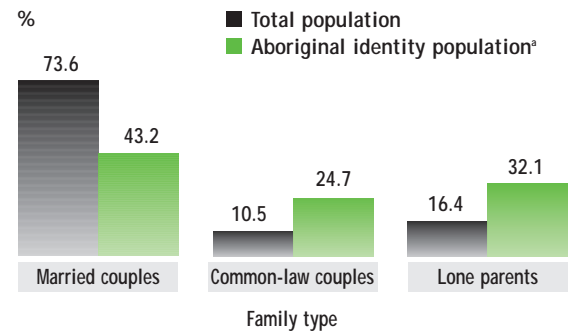
The majority (81%) of all families in Canada have either one or two children (CICH, 1994, p. 5). Smaller families mean fewer relatives (Vanier Institute of the Family, 1994, p. 10) and fewer sources of social support for members. Since Canada is a country of mobility and immigration, extended support networks are often drawn from outside the family.

## Family Violence

Child welfare is an area of provincial jurisdiction, and there are significant variations in the types of data collected and the manner in which they are reported. For these reasons, national child abuse data are currently not available. However, development of a national database — the Canadian Incidence of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect — is under way. We do know that, on a national scale, children are frequently the victims of family violence. Girls are most often the victims of sexual assault.

4.3

Proportion of children aged 0 to 14 in Census families, by family structure, Canada, 1996



a. The population who reported identifying with at least one Aboriginal group: North American Indian, Métis or Inuit.

Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada (1998). *The Daily*, Catalogue No. 11-001, January 13, 1998.

1. "Census family" is defined by Statistics Canada as a now-married couple (with or without never-married sons or daughters of either or both spouses), a couple living common-law (again with or without never-married sons or daughters of either or both spouses), or a lone parent of any marital status, with at least one never-married son or daughter living in the same dwelling. Families of now-married and common-law couples together constitute husband-wife families.



### *Reported violence against children is increasing.*

Maltreatment assessments, complaints, and the number of children in need of protection appear to be increasing in most Canadian provinces. Moreover, it is generally accepted that substantial numbers of cases still go unreported in many jurisdictions (Wachtel, 1989, pp. 7–8). At the same time, public education programs across the country aimed at sensitizing the public to the full impact of violence against children are resulting in increases in reports of violence.

A survey of selected police agencies in 1996 showed that children under 18 years of age were the victims in 22% of all reported violent crimes. A much higher proportion of these assaults were sexual (60%) than physical (18%) (Statistics Canada, 1997c).

Family members are accused in one fourth of all assault cases against children under age 18. Very young children (under age 3) are more likely to be assaulted by family members than non-family members — almost 70% of victims under the age of 3 were assaulted by members of their own family (Statistics Canada, 1997c).

### *Girls are most at risk from sexual abuse.*

It has been estimated that 25% of girls and 10% of boys will be sexually abused before the age of 16 (Finkel, 1987, p. 245). Results of a 1998 study by Statistics Canada showed the following:

- Overall, girls are the primary victims of sexual assaults by family members, and represent four in every five victims of sexual assault by a family member (79%). Girls were also the victims in more than half of physical assaults (56%) (Statistics Canada, 1998c, p. 22).
- Girls and boys appear to be vulnerable to abuse by family members at different stages of their development. Higher numbers of girls were sexually assaulted by a family member at 12 to 15 years of age. In contrast, boys were more likely to be sexually assaulted between the ages of 4 and 8 (Statistics Canada, 1998c, p. 3).
- Of all reported child abuse cases committed by family members, 20% were physical assault. Parents were the most likely perpetrators in 64% of these cases; 73% were committed by fathers and 27% by mothers. Thirty-two percent of all reported sexual abuse cases were committed by a family member. In 43% of these sexual assault cases, one of the parents was the most likely perpetrator. In almost all of these cases (98%), the father was responsible; responsibility for the other 2% rested with the mother. The remaining 57% of sexual assault cases involved a sibling (28%), an extended family member (27%) or a spouse (1%). (Statistics Canada, 1998c, p. 22).

### **Children of Violence**

*Children who witness their mother being abused by their father or other male partner display higher rates of emotional problems, low self-esteem, withdrawal and depression. They also tend to have lower levels of school achievement (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 1996, p. 3).*



**Wife assault and child abuse often co-exist.**

One in three Canadian women has been assaulted by her partner, with many of these assaults being witnessed by children (Statistics Canada, 1994, pp. 4, 14). There is a 30% to 40% overlap between children who witness wife assault and children who experience direct physical or sexual abuse themselves (Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson, 1990, pp. 21–22).

**Violence is a problem in Aboriginal families.**

There are currently no national data on the incidence of family violence in Aboriginal communities. However, existing research indicates that abuse pervades these communities. For example:

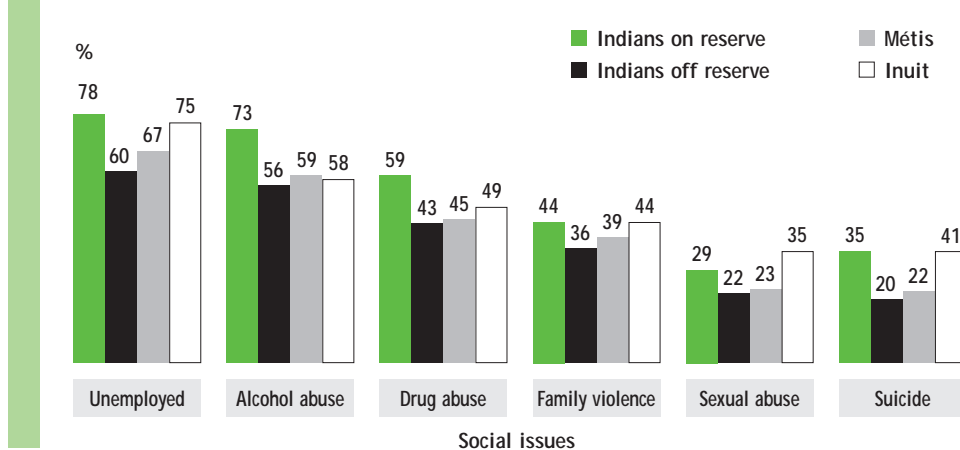
- 39% of Aboriginal adults say that family violence is a problem in their community, and a large proportion state that unemployment, alcohol, sexual abuse and suicide are significant problems (Statistics Canada, 1993, p. 114). See **Exhibit 4.4**.
- In some northern Aboriginal communities, it is believed that between 75% and 90% of women are battered. One study found that 40% of children in these communities had been physically abused by a family member (Health Canada, 1996b).

**Costs of Violence**

*There are many social costs associated with family violence: children and adolescents with histories of maltreatment are more likely to engage in risky behaviours and to come into contact with the justice system. Adolescents who have experienced neglect, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, or exposure to inter-parental violence are more likely to run away from home and to use tobacco and other drugs. These adolescents are often less able to adjust to life changes and are more likely to contemplate suicide, suffer from mental illness and engage in criminal behaviour (Manion and Wilson, 1995, pp. 7, 28).*

*It is estimated that the public spends US\$169,029 on each child sexual abuse offender. The expenditure for each victim is estimated at US\$14,304 (Prentky and Burgess, 1990, pp. 106–120).*

**4.4** Proportion of Aboriginal people, aged 15+, identifying selected social issues as a problem, Canada, 1991



Source: Statistics Canada (1993). *Language, Tradition, Health, Lifestyle and Social Issues: 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey*. Catalogue No. 89-533. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.



## School and Community Networks

As seen earlier, the relationships that children and youth establish and the experiences they have in their school and community are critically important to their development. A child's secondary support network is the local community, which offers developmental opportunities through informal play, organized recreation, schooling and cultural experiences.

### *A supportive school environment is important.*

Schools can provide a variety of positive influences on children. They can promote self-esteem, provide opportunities to experience success, and enable students to develop both social and problem-solving skills (Rutter, 1987). A supportive school environment can also act as a buffer against potentially harmful conditions in the home and in other non-school environments (Dubois et al., 1992).

"Successful" schools are characterized by a number of common elements related to social support: higher levels of parental involvement; higher teacher expectations of student achievement; relevant curriculum content with emphasis on specific literacy skills; collaboration among administrators, teachers and students; a positive school climate where students feel safe and have a sense of belonging; integration of students from differing social class backgrounds and ability levels; and an emphasis on prevention over remediation (Willms, 1999).

According to the NLSCY, most children are involved in sports outside of school; however, only 30% attended music, dance or art lessons or participated in Brownies or Scouts (CCSD, 1997, p. 47).

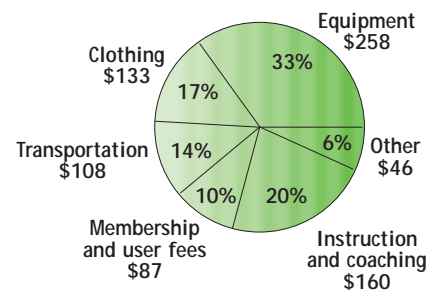
### *Cost is a factor.*

While most Canadian cities provide recreational programs for children and youth, almost all charge user fees (CCSD, 1997, p. 32). According to the Canadian Council on Social Development, nearly half of poor families say a barrier to participation is the cost of physical recreation (CCSD, 1997, p. 9). Almost 70% of 4- to 11-year-olds from families earning less than \$20,000 a year did not participate in organized sports such as hockey or gymnastics; however, approximately two thirds of children from households with a family income of \$40,000 or more did participate (NLSCY data cited in CCSD, 1997, p. 47). See

**Exhibit 4.5.**

4.5

Average yearly expenditures on physical activities for children aged 0 to 18, Canada, 1995



Source: Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (1996). "The Economics of Participation." *Progress in Prevention*, Bulletin No. 10, p. 2.



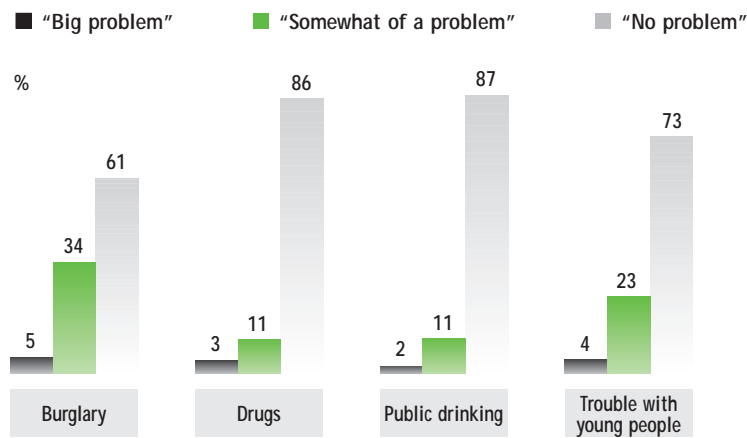
## Community Security

The majority of Canadian children live in neighbourhoods that their parents believe to be safe; however, one in four children lives in an area that their parents believe is unsafe after dark (CCSD, 1997, p. 8). See **Exhibit 4.6**.

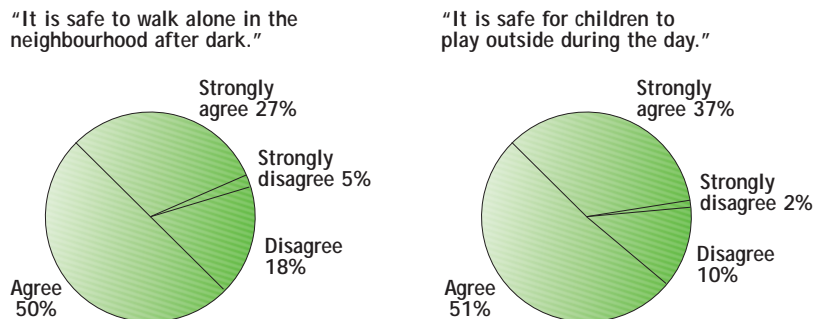
Children and youth themselves are fearful — a 1996 study of 15-year-olds found that one half of the boys and one quarter of the girls felt that bullying was a problem (CCSD, 1997, p. 10).

### 4.6 Proportion of children aged 0 to 11 whose parents report selected safety issues in their neighbourhood, Canada, 1994–95

#### A. Extent to which selected issues are reported by parents as problematic



#### B. Proportion of parents who agree/disagree with selected statements about neighbourhood safety



Source: Prepared by the Centre for International Statistics at the Canadian Council on Social Development using Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 1994 and 1995. In Canadian Council on Social Development (1997). *The Progress of Canada's Children — 1997*. Ottawa: CCSD, p. 23.

## Child and Youth Crime

While the overall rate of *Criminal Code* offences among youth declined between 1991 and 1996, there has been an increase in the proportion of young offenders charged with violent crime. For all offences, the 1996 youth rate



was down 4% from that of 1991. Of these 118,000 youth, 56% were charged with property offences and approximately 20% were violent crimes. Over the past decade, the rate of violent crimes has more than doubled from 9% in 1986. This may seem alarming, but the rising rate is due to the increased proportion of common assaults, the least serious form of assault (Statistics Canada, 1997d, p. 7).

In 1996–97, 12- and 13-year-olds accounted for 12% of cases in youth court, while 16- and 17-year-olds accounted for 49% of cases (Statistics Canada, 1998d). Youth court statistics (Statistics Canada, 1998d) show that:

- The overall caseload decreased 8.5% between 1992–93 and 1996–97.
- Property crime (which accounts for about one half of all youth court cases) dropped 20.6% over the same period, while violent crime increased very slightly and drug cases doubled.
- Since 1992–93, about one half of all cases heard involved minor assaults. Murder/manslaughter cases accounted for less than 1% of youth court cases.

A 1994 public opinion survey showed that most (four out of five) Canadians felt that Canada's justice system was too lenient (Angus Reid Group Inc., 1994, p. 18).

## Street Youth

*Although the exact numbers of street youth in Canada are not known, estimates are high. For example, between 3,000 and 5,000 youth lived on the streets in Toronto in 1990. The same study of Toronto's street youth revealed that about two thirds had been physically abused and one fifth had been sexually abused by someone living with them. Over half (58%) of those surveyed reported that the abuse contributed to their decision to live on the street (Smart et al., 1992, p. 24).*



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## Social Environment and Other Determinants

### Income

Divorce affects children emotionally and economically. Children of divorced parents are more likely to live in poverty, be exposed to ongoing inter-parental conflict, and see less of their non-residential parent. At the same time, the mothers of these children experience increased social support (Mandell and Duffy, 1995, p. 227).

Poverty is a significant risk factor for exposure to family or neighbourhood violence and the development of aggressive behaviour patterns. In 1995, the National Council of Welfare reported that about 2.6 million Canadian households were living in poverty (CCSD, 1997, p. 29).



Child abuse and neglect can be attributed to a number of factors — one of which is poverty. “Family factors include substance abuse, a history of family violence, high levels of family discord and inadequate parenting in the previous generation. Social and economic factors include inadequate monetary support, unemployment or underemployment and a lack of social services” (Advisory Committee on Children’s Services, 1990, p. 22).

### Education

According to the NLSCY, positive parenting is associated with normal and advanced scores on school readiness tests (Ross, Scott and Kelly, 1996, p. 42).

### Genetic and Biological Factors

Biological and genetic risk factors can limit the kinds of environment in which children are able to participate. For example, some schools and recreational facilities may not be able to accommodate children with disabilities. Children with this type of risk factor may have their health further impaired by being in an inappropriate environment.

## ***Role of the Media***

*Either explicitly or implicitly, the media convey socializing messages that influence children’s values, attitudes and social behaviour patterns.*

*Accessibility to new technologies is increasing the potential for exposure to violent media messages. Violence is very much a part of the entertainment culture — including television, video, films, video games and comic books (CPHA, 1994, p. 12).*

*Cable TV subscriptions increased from 47% in 1977 to nearly 74% in 1994 (Frank, 1995, p. 5). In 1996, nearly one third (31.6%) of households owned a personal computer — three times as many as in 1986 (Statistics Canada, 1996b). Television watching is cited as the most common extra-curricular activity of children (CCSD, 1997, p. 10).*

*Each year, the average Canadian child is exposed to 12,000 acts of violence and more than 1,000 rapes on television. By the time that same child graduates high school, he or she will have been exposed to 18,000 television murders and 800 television suicides (Chance, Avard and Thurm, 1995, p. 2).*



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