



Alliance nationale pour les enfants

National Children's Alliance

**MIDDLE CHILDHOOD MATTERS
TOWARDS AN AGENDA FOR 6 - 12
NATIONAL CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE
NOVEMBER 2005**

NATIONAL CHILDRENS ALLIANCE

The National Children's Alliance is a coalition of 67 national organizations working collectively to enhance the well-being of children, youth and families in Canada. It is a model for collaboration across disciplines and sectors. Building on the strengths of hundreds of thousands of people working on the front lines in our communities and their combined research capacity, the National Children's Alliance works to build consensus on its policy development by mobilizing and linking practice and research to policy.

Since its inception in 1996, the National Children's Alliance has worked to:

- Promote the development and implementation of the National Children's Agenda;
- Develop policy recommendations;
- Facilitate dialogue on children's issues among all sectors;
- Engage provincial/territorial/regional constituent groups; and
- Strengthen its pan-Canadian networks of voluntary organizations and NGO's.

The members of the National Children's Alliance are:

- Active Healthy Kids
- Allergy Asthma Information Association
- Adoption Council of Canada
- Big Brothers and Sisters of Canada
- Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada
- Canadian Adolescents at Risk Research Network
- Canadian Association for Community Living
- Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs
- Canadian Association of Food Banks
- Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance
- Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists
- Canadian Association of Paediatric Health Centres
- Canadian Association of Social Workers
- Canadian Child Care Federation
- Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children
- Canadian Council for Refugees

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- Canadian Council on Social Development
- Canadian Institute of Child Health
- Canadian Living Foundation - Breakfast for learning
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Canadian Nurses Association
- Canadian Paediatric Society
- Canadian Parents for French
- Canadian Parks & Recreation Association
- Canadian Psychological Association
- Canadian Public Health Association
- Canadian School Boards Association
- Canadian Teachers' Federation
- Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada
- Child Welfare League of Canada
- Children's Aid Society
- Family Service Canada
- Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada
- First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada
- Frontier College
- Hospital for Sick Children Foundation
- Invest in Kids
- Kids Help Phone
- La Commission nationale des parents francophone
- Laidlaw Foundation
- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
- Métis National Council of Women
- Movement for Canadian Literacy
- National Anti-Poverty Organization
- National Association of Friendship Centres
- National Youth In Care Network
- Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association
- Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada
- Pollution Probe
- Power Camp national
- Safe Kids Canada
- Save the Children Canada
- Scouts Canada
- SOS Children's Villages Canada
- SpeciaLink: The National Centre for Child Care Inclusion
- Street Kids International
- The Student's Commission
- Thrive! The Canadian Centre for Positive Youth Development
- UNICEF Canada
- United Way of Canada - Centraide Canada
- Vanier Institute of the Family
- YOUCAN
- YWCA of Canada
- YMCA Canada

Government Commitments

The National Children's Alliance stresses the Government of Canada's recent formal commitments to children, youth and their families:

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991);
- National Children's Agenda (1999);
- Early Childhood Development agreement (2000);
- UN Special Session on Children "A World Fit for Children" (2002);
- Multi-lateral Framework on Early Learning and Care (2003);
- National Plan of Action for Children "A Canada Fit for Children"; 2004 and
- Bi-lateral Early Learning and Child Care Agreements (2005).

The National Children's Alliance member organizations are particularly concerned with promoting policies that support children, youth and families. In a country as wealthy as Canada, there is an enormous opportunity to develop a policy mix that supports our most vulnerable and marginalized populations to participate fully in all aspects of community life. The plight of Canada's aboriginal children is a national disgrace. Through research it is clear that children of immigrants and children with disabilities also face barriers. Supporting children and youth to reach their potential is fundamental to their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. But we also know that optimizing their health and well-being promotes their capacity to participate fully and make positive contributions to society.

Children living in poverty are at risk of not having their fundamental needs met. There are 1 in 6 children living in poverty Canada, this means there are more than 1 million children whose healthy development is jeopardized. In 2004, 317,000 children in Canada used food banks. As the "Make Poverty History Campaign" continues to gain momentum worldwide and here in Canada, there is an opportunity for the federal government to show leadership. The National Anti-

Poverty Organization has recently launched a youth poverty initiative. The National Child Tax Benefit has proven to be an effective program – now it is time to deepen the investment.

Recommended Actions:

- **Increase the National Child Tax Benefit to a maximum of \$4,900 per child available to all low, modest and middle income families, without clawbacks for families on social assistance**
- **Increase federal minimum wage to \$10 per hour**
- **Increase access to parental leave benefits for part-time, self-employed and seasonal workers**
- **Increase parental leave benefits to 75% of earnings and eliminate the waiting period**
- **Expand family leave provisions within the Employment Insurance program to include paid leave for a parent who must temporarily or periodically care for a child with disability-related needs**
- **Create a cross-departmental policy priority on literacy in the context of lifelong learning**

INVESTING IN SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

While physical infrastructure is commonly recognized as an enabler of productivity, in the global knowledge-based economy, social infrastructure is proving to be equally if not more important. “Social infrastructure encompasses the inter-dependent mix of places and spaces, programs and networks at all levels”.¹ Social infrastructure supports human development and contributes to community life.

“Research is clear that an adequate family income, while important, is not sufficient to ensure that children reach their potential. In fact, there are more children living in middle class families that are at risk than there are children living in poor families”.² Jacques van der Gaag of the World Bank estimates that every dollar invested in children returns three dollars in future health savings. Economists are recognizing that the “strategic use of our social programs, especially programs that invest in children, is the best, most cost-effective way to promote productivity growth and prosperity”.³

Recent survey results indicate that there are 2 million workers in the voluntary non-profit sector and that more than one quarter of the organizations in the sector delivers services to children, youth and their families, most at the local level.⁴ This data does not include the participation of volunteers. Communities are playing a key role in supporting children, youth and families. However, there is a fundamental role for governments in the delivery of community services and in the support of community organizations to ensure a vibrant and healthy social infrastructure. A recent study by United Way of Toronto urged that “governments at all levels must make a commitment to reverse the spiral of growing neighbourhood distress by delivering improved economic prospects and jobs, safer neighbourhoods, decent and affordable housing, accessible community programs and services.”⁵

Housing is a fundamental need for healthy child and youth development. “There are more than 700,000 Canadian households in severe housing need, more than all the households of PEI, NB and NS combined”.⁶ Continued national leadership is needed through implementation of a National Housing Strategy. Adequate funding for housing is fundamental in making a difference to our most disadvantaged children and youth. The negative impact to children’s health of inadequate housing is exacerbated by the effects on mental health and educational attainment due to frequent moves.

Community matters. "Family enabling environments are required in order to provide much-needed support for parents and children, ensure positive and nurturing experiences to children and help parents cope with the stresses of raising children."⁷ The ecological model of human development emphasizes the importance of taking into account the rich and inter-connected influences of parent, family, neighbourhood, community, public services and public policies. Inclusion of all children and youth, irrespective of ability, cultural group, socio-economic status or geography, is dependent upon vibrant communities.

"The social infrastructure of urban communities is a new frontier of federal responsibility. Social infrastructure priorities include serious contributions to affordable housing and public transit, strengthening services and programs for immigrants and refugees, recognizing recreation as an essential urban amenity for health promotion and civic cohesion, facilitating the transitions of urban aboriginal peoples and developing effective preventive approaches to community safety and security".⁸ Funding for social infrastructure should not just be about "bricks and mortar" but should foster inclusive programs, services and community networks as well as to build and sustain the capacity of existing successful child and youth serving organizations.

Recommendations:

- **Develop a federally funded community social infrastructure initiatives program as part of the Cities/Communities Agenda**
- **As part of a national housing and homelessness initiative allocate the \$1.6 billion promised in the 2005 Budget for affordable housing**
- **Implement the Voluntary Sector Initiatives' Code of Good Funding practice in order to better support organizational costs to promote the role of the voluntary and non-profit sector in the provision of Canada's social infrastructure**

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD MATTERS

Maintaining the effectiveness our investment in the early years depends upon the continuation of services and supports through school-age. In Canada today there is a policy void for our school-aged children 6-12 years old. Many people assume that the schools are able to meet all of their needs. "Children in their middle years are developing no less dynamically than those 0 to 6. They move from being one hundred percent dependent upon their families to becoming autonomous".⁹

Building resilience during the school years makes important contributions to long-term well-being. Children who have caring adults in their lives are "more resilient towards some of the risk factors that can put child development in jeopardy". "Through mentoring, modeling positive behaviors and being supportive a caring adult can make a tremendous difference in a child's life".¹⁰ Community based programs such as Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters and YM/YWCA's are critical preventive services and fundamental components of community social infrastructure.

There is cause for concern about the health of Canada's school-aged children. "It is estimated that 30-40% of children and families experience poverty, family breakdown, violence, child neglect, abuse or substance abuse. These experiences can act as risk factors for healthy development and make it difficult for children to develop into caring, competent adults".¹¹ The need for positive peer relationships during this stage and the negative consequences of bullying for growth and development are increasingly being recognized given that "approximately 23% of Canadian young people in Grades 6 through 10 reported that they bullied others".¹²

Competence in the arts and sports is shown to be an important factor in protecting children against the occurrence of emotional and behavioral problems where children are at risk. Participation in recreation is linked to better school outcomes, decreased participation in negative behaviors and better physical and mental health.

The need for community-based programs is particularly acute for Aboriginal children, on and off reserve. Community programs that support Aboriginal children, youth and their families are critical to turning the tide. Research evidence is clear that the introduction of responsive community services and supports improves the outcomes of children, youth and their families. Aboriginal children in their middle years have access to very few supports. "Throughout the 1990's, federal and provincial governments slashed program budgets for those programs dedicated to urban Aboriginal children aged 6-12 years"¹³ We know what works, it is time to make substantive investments in service delivery on successful programs such as Li'l Beavers delivered by the Friendship Centres.

Physical inactivity is a serious public health issue. One quarter of Canada's children and youth are not active enough for healthy growth and development and contributes to increasing childhood obesity. Physical activity increases resistance to heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, arthritis and mental health disorders. Some conservative estimates suggest that illness due to physical inactivity is costing the Canadian health care system \$2.1 billion annually in direct health care costs.¹⁴ "For every dollar that is invested in physical activity, there is a long term savings of \$11 in health care costs".¹⁵

It is estimated that less than 4% of schools in Canada offer quality daily physical education programs".¹⁶ Children and youth often face barriers to participating in recreation. The most common barrier is cost, with today's highest fees for programs, sport group membership and admission to recreation centres.¹⁷ Other barriers include physical disability, transportation, language and culture. For the

more than one million children and youth in Canada that live in poverty, their rates of participation in recreation and physical activity is much lower than for others.

Public parks and community centres are good for cities and communities as they revitalize urban cores and attract residents, helping to limit urban sprawl. Even small lots, when developed into a public space can transform a neighborhood. Opportunities for recreation and outdoor play help ease the pressures on families and contribute to healthy relationships, within the family and community. More indoor and outdoor public recreation spaces and family places will help build healthier children, youth, families and communities. Research shows that “72% of children living in civic communities are in organized sports, compared to 42% in non-civic communities”.¹⁸

Children's mental health issues are of increasing concern to the members of the National Children's Alliance. Current research indicates that almost one in five of Canada's children have behavioral and emotional problems severe enough to interfere with their normal development, and this often impacts educational attainment. The scope of this problem points to the need for prevention and early intervention. A recent study concludes that “recreation maintains the competence of children with emotional, conduct, hyperactive disorders to be equal to non-disordered children. The result is a reduction in parental mental health problems such as sleep disorders and worry, and there is a ten percent greater exit from social assistance, as shown in economic adjustment scores and the use of food bank services.”¹⁹

Research tells us that the key protective factors are : individual competence and social skills; social supports and relationships; and, involvement in community and school cultural activities and recreation. Programs and services that directly support children and their families are the critical to prevention, particularly for those from poor families.

The federal government has some established models for investing in communities such as the Homelessness Initiative. The National Children's Alliance has worked the Federation of Canadian Municipalities on the issue of community infrastructure for recreation and participation. An initiative for "Public Spaces – Family Places" could support development and maintenance of inclusive community play and recreation spaces, programs and centres and to fund programs for increasing access to recreation and development opportunities associated that lever community partnerships and support.

"In 1999 the Government of Canada made a commitment to the National Children's Agenda – and, in partnership with the provinces and territories launched the Early Childhood Development Initiative. In 2004, the first group of young children to benefit from that initiative is now turning 5. It is time to act".²⁰ Today these children are six years old. This is an opportunity to continue to build the National Children's Agenda Canada's children in middle childhood.

Recommendations:

- **An investment in a community infrastructure fund of \$300 million over 3 years in "Public Spaces – Family Places".**
- **Establish a "Child and Youth Centre" within Canada's new Public Health Agency with a focus on community-based prevention.**
- **Increase funding for community-based programs for Aboriginal children ages 6-12 to contribute to their health, well-being and success at school.**

Endnotes

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- ² Louise Hanvey, *ibid.*, page 1
- ³ Daniel Trefler, *ibid.*, page 27
- ⁴ Statistics Canada, "Highlights of the National Survey of Non-Profit and Voluntary Organizations", page 14, 2004
- ⁵ United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development, "Poverty by Postal Code: The Geography of Neighbourhood Poverty: 1991-2001", Toronto; United Way of Greater Toronto, 2004
- ⁶ National Children's Alliance, brochure
- ⁷ Sheri Torjman, *c*Caledon Institute of Social Policy, *Community Renewal*, 2004
- ⁸ Peter Clutterbuck and Marvyn Novick, "Building Inclusive Communities: Cross Canada Perspectives and Strategies", Laidlaw Foundation, page 32, 2003
- ⁹ National Children's Alliance, Proceedings from "National Roundtable: Developing a Public Policy Agenda for Children Ages 6 to 12", 2002
- ¹⁰ Middle Childhood Matters: A Framework to Promote Healthy Development of Children 6-12, Child and Youth Health Network for Eastern Ontario, United Way Ottawa and CHEO, page 13, 2005
- ¹¹ Rianne Mahon, Canadian Policy Research Networks, "School-aged Children across Canada: A Patchwork of Public Policies", 2001
- ¹² Canadian Adolescents at Risk Research Network, Queen's University, "Adolescent Bullying", Feb 2004
- ¹³ National Association of Friendship Centres, "The Impact of Aboriginal Friendship Centres Program on Increasing Canada's Productivity", Brief to the Standing Committee on Finance, October 2005
- ¹⁴ Press Release August 5, 2005 Conference of Federal-Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation
- ¹⁵ Donnelly, Laidlaw Foundation
- ¹⁶ Canadian Paediatric Society, "Are we doing enough?: A Status Report on Canadian public policy and child and youth health", 2005
- ¹⁷ Louise Hanvey, "Access to Recreation Programs in Canada", Canadian Council on Social Development, Perception 24, 2001
- ¹⁸ The Child and Adolescent Development Task Group of the F/P/T Advisory Committee on Population Health and Health Security, "Middle Childhood: Taking Action Together", July 2004
- ¹⁹ Dr. Gina Browne, National Children's Alliance, Proceedings from "National Roundtable: Developing a Public Policy Agenda for Children Ages 6 to 12", page 19, 2002
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, page 22