



Alliance nationale pour les enfants

National Children's Alliance

Inuit Children

**Policy Brief prepared for the Middle Childhood Initiative of
the National Children's Alliance**

By: Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada

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Canada, Community Partnership Branch**



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PAUKTUUTIT
INUIT WOMEN OF CANADA

Policy Brief

INUIT MIDDLE CHILDHOOD YEARS

for the

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, in response to an invitation from the National Children's Alliance, is pleased to present this brief outline of issues affecting the middle childhood years as experienced by Inuit.

This document supports unique Inuit specific consideration regarding the circumstances facing and ideas for improvements for Canada's Inuit children aged six to twelve. It is good to recognize and honour the reality that the Inuit experience is distinct from that of any other - in Canada or elsewhere.

Time and financial constraints dictate that this paper is necessarily a limited overview of a very few of the issues facing these children...it is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive in scope. For example, we know that there are nutritional, tobacco, dental, alcohol and emotional health crises among Inuit children. Each is worthy of an intensive examination and focused programming. These will not be described in this paper. Rather, we have chosen three interrelated topics – housing, abuse, early birthing age and FASD, to demonstrate the holistic and all encompassing nature of the challenges facing these children. We hope the paper begins to point out the urgency of the plight of these children and that it begins to point to some early ideas and suggestions for successful action.

Discussion will focus on the effects on Inuit children of three interrelated factors and offers recommended actions for each:

1. critical housing shortage, over crowdedness and design unsuitability;
2. the appalling and unacceptable incidence of violence and
3. the urgent need for comprehensive management, respite and in-home supports for children and their families living with special needs requirement such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

INUIT MIDDLE CHILDHOOD YEARS

INTRODUCTION

The **National Children's Alliance** raised the issue of how little is known about Canada's children during the middle childhood years – children aged six to twelve. Early research had discovered that little attention has been paid to this important and consequential time in the lives of our children, so the NCA decided to address this gap. Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada and other partner organizations were invited to contribute to the initiative – to provide input that it is hoped will result in Government of Canada policy decisions and subsequent programs that will result in happier lives and the holistic wellness of Canada's children aged six to twelve.

BACKGROUND

Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada was created in 1984 as the national non-profit association representing all Inuit women in Canada. There are no membership fees and all Inuit women are members.

Issues related to violence and the health and well-being of children are priorities, as the social, economic and health issues of concern to Inuit women cannot be separated from their children. For Pauktuutit SIDS, traditional midwifery, maternal and infant care and pre-natal programs, teen pregnancy, FASD, and child sexual assault have become important priorities, breaking the silence on very difficult issues such as family violence and the sexual abuse of children.

However, as with many other child focused organizations, no formal policy specific to children age six to twelve has been adopted. Pauktuutit's Early Learning and Child Care Programs, community helper awareness and training workshops around Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, the Nuluaq Abuse Cessation Program, and Sexual Health programs all contribute to the wellness of the middle years child, but only as a secondary affect.

Children in this age group are in school most of the day and programs emphasized there are mainly academic and sports related. Team sports such as hockey and soccer become formalized. Competition is keen. The school reality is that timetables are full and curriculum stress does not always include time for programs around self-esteem and positive lifestyle choices. Schools cannot provide what was traditionally taught within families.

At the same time, if families are living in stressful circumstances, key teachings about choices and boundaries might be marginalized and the middle years child may often be overlooked as being 'looked after' at school. At a time of vulnerability and impressionability, a child may well have difficulty learning to make safe and effective behaviour choices.

A LITTLE HISTORY

With globalization comes innovation: Over the past hundred years, Inuit, formerly isolated, remote and nomadic, have been radically impacted by an influx of non northerners, with their own cultures, languages and agendas. Add to this the very recent arrival of scheduled flights serving the north, unheard of commodities and drugs, relocation from nomadic lifestyles into centralized communities, television beamed by the Anik satellite, and fast changing computer technology. This much change within two generations is unique, to say the least, and has created many serious consequences and adjustment issues. Every aspect of Inuit social and economic fabric has been affected, and nowhere is this more evident than within the Inuit family. What has evolved over hundreds of years for most cultures has been forced on the Inuit culture within the last sixty. How has this impacted the Inuit child?

Family is to community as child is to family: a child's first community is the family. And within that family community, children learn values and coping strategies. Families in turn are the basis for community structures and approach. Healthy families need adequate housing, clean water, health and support services, and the opportunity to interact and share in a safe environment.

Meaningful and practical pre-school readiness programs have been initiated, and are now being strengthened and supported. On the other hand, programs specific to the middle childhood years are non-existent. For Inuit children aged six to twelve, housing is almost always crowded, often inadequate so that they have little privacy, may be exposed to troubling adult interaction, and sometimes are left with extraordinary responsibility for household management and sibling care. All of this has negative implications for the developing child during the middle years.

According to the 2001 Canadian Census, 45,070 people reported Inuit identity.¹ Most of these live in remote fly-in communities of Canada's north. About 10% of the Inuit population lives in Canada's southern regions, most in cities². Further, Inuit of Canada are a very young population: 40% are under 14 years of age. "...in 2001, the 6 -12 age group made up roughly 18% of the total Inuit population."³

HOUSING AND POPULATION

Housing Shortages

As mentioned, Inuit children often live in homes that are overcrowded, poorly designed and unsuitable to the Inuit culture. Canadian Mortgage and Housing (CMHC) information around suitability (an indicator of crowding) of housing finds 16.8% of Inuit households fall below the suitability standard, compared to 1.95% of non-Aboriginal

¹ http://www42.statcan.ca/smr08/smr08_007_e.htm.

² Statistics Canada, Canadian Census, 2001.

³ Heather Tait, Statistics Canada: Canadian Census, 2001.

households. 12.1% of Inuit households fall below the adequacy standard, versus 2.0% of non-Aboriginal households.

The following chart (TABLE I) for the year 2001⁴ shows the percentage of households that have six or more people in them. Note that the chart uses the 2001 names Labrador (now Nunatsiavut), Northern Quebec (now Nunavik), and the Inuit region of the Northwest Territories (now Inuvialuit.)

[NOTE] Inuit housing information from the June, 2006 (that may reflect increased housing starts) will be available later this year.

TABLE I

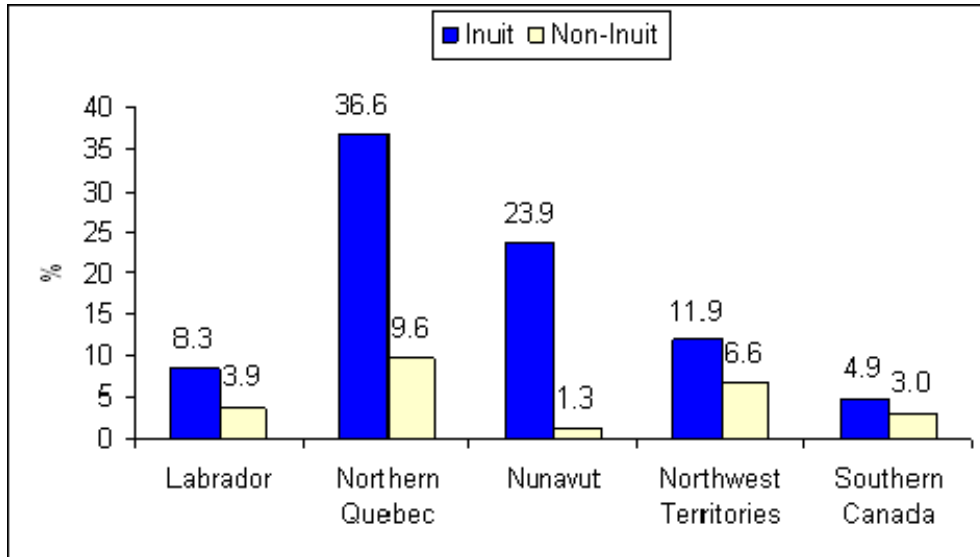


TABLE II (below) shows Inuit and non-Inuit households in the north and south of Canada by the number of residents per household. You can see that in the north, 22% of Inuit households had 6 or more people in 2001.

⁴ Statistics Canada: Canadian Census, 2001.

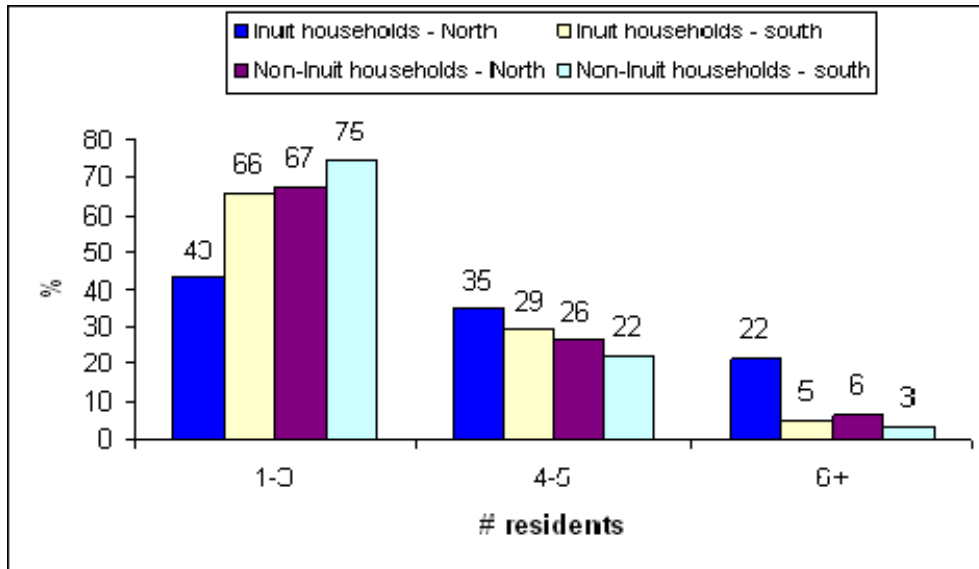


TABLE II

HOUSING AND THE BIRTH RATE FACTOR

An August 8, 2006 callout from a Nunatsiaq News article states, “*One in four mothers is in teens: low birth weights common.*” For every one hundred women who gave birth in Nunavut in 2004, twenty-four were between the ages of 15 and 19. In 2000, the age of first birth in the Baffin region fell from between 16-18 years to 14-16 years.⁵

A Nunatsiaq News feature, August 4, 2006, “*Birth Numbers Make Nunavut Special*”, included information on the increased risk of complications for both mother and child when the mother is young.

*“Young pregnant women are less likely to eat well, get prenatal check-ups, and to stop smoking. Pregnant teens run a risk of anemia, high blood pressure, and premature labour. Their children have a higher risk of problems related to prematurity and low birth weight.”*⁶

What significance has this for the middle childhood years? Essentially it means that in those six years between the ages of 6 and 12, there is a profound need to learn about self esteem, personal values, the consequences of life choices and the concept of personal boundaries. Children need to be taught and shown the value of sexual health and behaviour. Inuit middle year’s children often have to make decisions for which he/she is not ready. The middle years represent a time of investigation, identity crisis, developmental change, the sorting out of morality issues, and many Inuit children are not given the opportunity to be children. The recent trend towards younger first birth age is not only dangerous to mother and child, it undermines the strength of the entire community.

⁵ Statistics Canada: Canadian Census, 2001.

⁶ Nunatsiaq News, August 4, 2006.

Overcrowded homes leave no place for the middle years child to visit with friends or find a quiet place for homework. As mentioned above, all adult interaction takes place in front of children, and these children are also tasked with caring for troubled adults, themselves and also younger siblings.

While there has been much talk about this situation, the only sign that something might happen is a recent announcement⁷ promising increased housing in Nunavut. This is one of four remote regions in which Inuit live – Nunavut, Nunatsiavut (Labrador), Nunavik (northern Quebec), and Inuvialuit (northern Northwest Territories). Collectively they are referred to as Inuit Nunaat (Inuit Homeland). Nunavut is the largest territory with the highest population, so it provides us with a fair measure of circumstances in which many Inuit live

HOUSING/POPULATION RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Government of Canada and Inuit Regional Corporations place a much higher priority on initiatives that address the fundamental need for increased and improved housing;
2. Awareness and prevention programs concertedly focus on early Sexual Health Education with a view to changing social perceptions around young pregnancy among the young. *“It’s cool to get pregnant early”* is a concept that needs to be addressed, much as *“smoking is the Inuit way”* is now being actively countered by facts and Inuit youth who are being taught the truth.
3. Clear, comprehensive, practical and understandable sexual health education must be a mandatory part of school curricula for the children of the middle childhood population.

VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Unfortunately, abuse is sometimes present in Inuit communities, showing its ugly head in many forms – verbal, emotional and sexual abuse, physical violence, and financial abuse. Each of these causes and promotes anxiety, fear and anger, not to mention physical injury and death. During the middle childhood years, Inuit children are vulnerable to, and impressed by observed behaviours - they are often front row observers and early victims of patterns of behaviour that they learn to see as acceptable and normal.

⁷ July 11, 2006, Nunatsiaq News. Olayuk Akesuk, the Minister responsible for the Nunavut Housing Corporation announced a \$200 million program to build new housing units in one Inuit region, Nunavut, saying, *“These new housing units will help in our battle against overcrowded housing.”*

As children grow, their sense of confidence and surety about the connection between actions and reactions is challenged and undermined: Children cannot safely and accurately predict what behaviour will result in what consequence. Volatile behaviour destabilizes the child's capacity to determine reasonable expectations around behaviours. Confusion and fear create low self-esteem. In turn, a child is less likely to make clear, beneficial choices for herself in interaction with others.

And for an abuser, fear of discovery is often a deterrent to accepting help. There is also a long held fear that children may be taken from the home. All this in an overcrowded home adds to the stress levels all of its residents.

Pauktuutit is committed to addressing the level and character of violence and abuse. We have several initiatives underway to support non-violence throughout Inuit communities. In particular, the Violence Against Women and Children Project is designed to strengthen community networks by identifying and fostering individual communities as they become committed to Zero Tolerance of abuse toward women and children. Pauktuutit facilitates the combined commitment of community women's groups, local institutions and provincial/territorial and federal government providers of social or health services, to establish and implement practical, results-oriented strategic plans to achieve 'zero tolerance' for abuse in their individual communities.

VIOLENCE AND ABUSE REDUCTION RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Make the effects of abuse on children in Inuit communities a priority issue - individual communities must be provided the tools to make significant reductions in the incidence and tolerance of child abuse in their communities.
2. Communications – no longer can abuse be considered a taboo topic. We must all raise awareness and reduce the incidence and tolerance of child abuse.
3. Invest in training and capacity development. What and where is child abuse? What can I do about it? Where can I turn?
4. Sustain front-line workers and community services. All across the north and in urban Inuit communities, front-line workers and community services are insufficient in numbers, overworked and under supported. This must change.
5. Deliver sufficient, substantive, culturally relevant services that heal. This one is obvious – token, pilot, temporary programs simply raise expectations. Successful programs that build on Inuit strengths and prevent abuse must be sustained, expanded and replicated.

SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

Imagine life as a child who needs one-on-one help with most tasks of daily life, while living in an overcrowded, possibly troubled home. This sometimes is the plight of the

child living with special needs. For the purpose of describing the difficulty a family might experience in raising a special needs child, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) has been selected. As of 2004, there are no official statistics on the prevalence of FASD in Canada, only estimates. Because there has been no comprehensive approach to diagnosing FASD-related conditions, it is difficult to gather data on the prevalence of FASD. Health Canada is taking steps to develop a system of diagnosis that would assist in data collection.⁸

There are insufficient in-home support programs for families. There is little diagnosis, management or even advocacy for services that would allow the child to live in a supported environment – either at home or in school.

In -Home Visitation

Home visits for families living with FASD and other special needs may not be trusted by family members. Historically, some families saw these visits as a message to the community that the family was inadequate or at fault in some way: the family need for outside supports may be viewed as a weakness, or even a threat. For these reasons the best programs involving home visits must be developed by Inuit, for Inuit.

School Capacity

The majority of middle childhood is spent in the school. Knowledgeable, friendly schools that support the requirements of children living with FASD or other special needs, continue to be problematic. In the example of FASD, what is an FASD friendly school? Such a school would be comprised of a staff of teachers, all of whom were aware of FASD and its effects on attention span and learning. Teachers would have knowledge of basic adjustments to teaching style and classroom design that would benefit FASD children. Students would be included in programs in an adaptive way considerate of their unique strengths rather than only their deficits. Governments need to provide the resources necessary to increase school capacity.

Respite Care

Recognition for caregivers is often overlooked. The weariness and stress of ‘giving away’ pieces of your self over long periods of time can result in no longer having anything to give; the caregiver needs care. Respite care is a ‘time out’ for family members who are the central givers. It recognizes caregiver effort and the need for restorative time so that the caregiver can return rejuvenated. Caregiver wellness is essential to family and community health.

SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Inuit families need culturally appropriate long term management programs for all children living with special needs;

⁸ http://corp.aadac.com/for_women/the_basics_about_women/women_info_estimating_fasd.asp

2. Establish long term partnerships to ensure that the requirements of special needs children are being met within the school system,
3. Provide programs to ensure respite for caregivers. They need to be recognized and supported as fundamental to challenged children, families and communities.

INUIT PARTICIPATION

To be effective, all steps to address the issues identified in this paper must have input from Inuit and reflect Inuit ways of problem-solving. The principles of Inuit Qujaumajagangiiq are intrinsic to all these recommendations. See *The Inuit Way*, published in July 2006 by Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, and at www.pauktuutit.ca

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Government provide adequate, reliable core funding support for Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada (the only national organization actively engaged in the serious issues facing children in Canada's north) in order to increase our capacity-to build and implement effective community based strategies and practical, results driven program initiatives and
2. That there is a need to monitor and engage regional Inuit Organizations to ensure that they reflect their constituents' needs.
3. That the Government of Canada commit to ensuring that Inuit children aged six to twelve have at the very least, the minimal health, social, economic and educational benefits that all other Canadian children of this age group enjoy; and
4. That all national policy and programming be directed towards continued, broadened and enhanced community-based programs that support the child, each member of his/her family, social and health service providers, the school and the community as a whole.

CONCLUSION

We're not starting from zero. There are a few, albeit small and disjointed childhood and youth related programs in place in the Arctic, among them children's breakfast and nutritious snack programs; parenting skills programs; support for single parents; counselling and shelter for women and children fleeing violent homes; school tutoring programs; programs to teach traditional land skills; and drug and solvent abuse programs.

The National Children's Alliance, an organization of organizations concerned about the welfare of all children, is to be applauded for taking this first step in a call for policy perspectives papers to address the information gap regarding children aged six to twelve-the middle childhood years.

Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada supports the efforts of the NCA to increase awareness of and support for the needs of the middle years child. It is important that organizations who care for the wellness of children must reflect, discuss and engage new public policy directed towards this fragile group. What is needed is strong support to allow Inuit and the organizations that represent them to design and deliver their own community-based programs.

Children age six to twelve, in the formative childhood years, are treasures, every one - they must not be neglected, exploited, or invisible. Our future is in their hands.