

**Submission by the National Children's Alliance to  
The House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance  
Pre-Budget Consultation**

**Canada's Children and Youth – Securing our Future in a Competitive World**

**Executive Summary**

In addressing the questions posed by the *House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance* in the pre-budget consultation process entitled *Canada's Place in a Competitive World*, the *National Children's Alliance* is pleased to have this opportunity to respond by articulating the enormous importance that Canada's children and youth will have in securing our future in a competitive world. Our children and youth represent our best opportunity to ensure that in the future Canada's citizen's are healthy, well-educated, and productive contributors to our society and our economy, ensuring our success in a competitive world. In seeking appropriate measures for Budget 2007, we urge the committee to consider the significant role that our members and Canada's voluntary community sector play in supporting the positive development of our children and youth, the workforce of the future.

**About the National Children's Alliance**

The National Children's Alliance is a coalition of more than 65 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 experience and research capacity, the National Children's Alliance works to build consensus on policy development by mobilizing and linking practice and research to policy on a pan-Canadian basis. 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 issues affecting children and youth among all sectors;*
- *Engage provincial/territorial/regional constituent groups; and*
- *Strengthen its pan-Canadian network of voluntary organizations and NGO's.*

### ***Today's Children and Youth are Tomorrow's Workforce***

By definition, anyone under the age of 25 in Canada is considered to be in the 'youth' category. And approximately one-third of Canadians are under age 25. While this demographic is significant in itself, today's children and youth will become the next generation of Canada's workforce and will be under significant pressure to support our aging population. Effective policies and programs must recognize, anticipate, and respond appropriately to the needs of our increasingly diverse population as well. This demographic diversity presents itself differently across Canada, so federal initiatives should respect and support these regional differences. Canada's global competitiveness will therefore be very dependent on promoting and nourishing a positive environment to protect and enhance the well-being of our children and youth.

### ***Support for our Aging Population***

Canada is experiencing a demographic shift to an aging population. Canadians 65 years of age or older are the fastest growing population group. In 2001, 3.92 million Canadians were in this demographic, two thirds more than in 1981. During the same period the overall Canadian population has increased by only one quarter.<sup>1</sup> By 2020, the number of children and youth under the age of 25 is expected to decline to 9.3 million from the current 10 million. This represents a change from children and youth making up 32% of the population in 2004 to just 26% in 2020<sup>2</sup>. This is a significant change in that it indicates a smaller workforce in the future. It also highlights the necessity of a strong policy focus on our youth to ensure that they have the necessary skills required to be productive members of the workforce.

### ***Support for Children and Youth is an Investment in the Future***

Investing in our children and youth builds the foundation for a competitive labour market. Our future competitiveness will be based on the success of our next generation. The National Children's Alliance member organizations are particularly concerned with Canada's untapped human potential. 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. 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 the health and well-being of children and youth promotes their capacity to make positive contributions to society and to Canada's competitiveness on a global basis.

***The Progress of Canada's Children and Youth 2006*** report released earlier this year by our member the ***Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD)*** finds that the majority of children and youth in Canada are doing well, but that those with disabilities, aboriginal children, children living in poverty, and youth who are recent immigrants and visible minorities, face many obstacles. It is essential for the well-being of all Canadian children and youth that current levels of funding to support key health, education, and social services be maintained or increased. Our marginalized populations need consistent support in order to thrive and have the opportunity to become fully contributing members of society, ensuring that the next generation of the workforce is well-educated and positioned to meet the challenges of the global economy.

Following are the key factors which affect the well-being of children and youth that the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance needs to consider in creating a budget that will secure our future in a competitive world by enhancing and protecting pan-Canadian supports for children and youth. In seeking new initiatives to enhance Canada's competitiveness, we urge the government to not lose sight of the important investments in our children and youth that must continue to be made.

## 1. Family Life

*Many factors influence childhood experiences - perhaps none more so than the families in which children live. There is far more diversity among Canadian families now than in the past. Children are more likely to have fewer siblings and older parents. More mothers are in the labour force, and a larger proportion are working full time. Many children will experience more than one type of family configuration. For example, they may begin life in a two-parent family, become a single-parent family, and later live in a blended or step-family. More children than ever are in shared custody arrangements, and many are members of more than one family at the same time. Most parents are supportive and positive, but those numbers change as children get older. About one child in 10 lives with a parent who suffers from symptoms of depression; among lower-income children, it's one in five. More young adults – especially men - are living at home with their parents for longer than in the past.*

*From Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006*

Support for Canadian families is the starting point for support for children and youth. The family is the most important influence on a child's development. Families provide physically for children with food, shelter and clothing and they teach children the skills, values and attitudes necessary to participate in society. Studies have shown that youth who feel nurtured by their parents and who feel connected to their community report better health and a higher sense of self-worth<sup>3</sup>. In order for parents to provide a safe and secure family environment, they too must be supported. Canada must continue to emphasize strong support for children, youth, and families as a key element of a strong, globally-competitive society.

## 2. Economic Security

*Experiences and opportunities in childhood are greatly influenced by economic circumstances. Poverty in particular affects children in a myriad of ways, and it disproportionately affects certain groups: children in single-parent families, Aboriginal children, children with disabilities or whose parents have disabilities, and immigrant and visible minority children. Some children never experience poverty; they enjoy all the benefits and opportunities an adequate family income can provide. But since 1989, the annual poverty rate has fluctuated between 15% and 24%. Deep and persistent poverty has a critical effect on children's well-being and development. Some children spend their lives in poverty, while others move into and out of poverty, usually as a result of family breakdown, or parents finding or losing employment. Parents, too, are affected by the constant stress of poverty, and parental stress affects children. Government transfers - such as Employment Insurance (EI), the National Child Benefit, and the GST credit - do make a difference. The child poverty rate in 2003 was 18%; without government transfers, it would have been 27%.*

*From Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006*

Family income is one of the primary indicators of children's economic security. It directly affects children's living conditions, their opportunities to participate in school and community activities, and as a result, their sense of well-being. Family income is recognized to be a key determinant of healthy child development<sup>4</sup>. The majority of two-parent families are dual income while 65% of female single-parent families are employed. This does not mean that all families are thriving: The gap between families with the highest and lowest incomes is increasing. The working-poor face job insecurity characterized by part-time, seasonal or contract work. Typically these types of jobs do not provide enough hours or sufficient pay and benefits to enable families to make ends meet. Canada needs to continue to develop a strong and thriving domestic economy to ensure the availability of quality employment opportunities while continuing supports for low income families.

### **3. Physical Safety**

*Physical safety refers to the quality of children's natural and constructed environments, and our attempts to protect them from threats to their personal safety and well-being, such as environmental hazards, crime, and unintentional injuries. Children are at particular risk from environmental hazards because their systems are still developing, they spend more time outside, and they breathe more rapidly and deeply. They are exposed to higher levels of pollutants than previous generations, and studies indicate that damage from air pollution may begin as early as in the womb. Despite parents' best efforts to protect their children, research and analysis shows that unintentional injuries remain the leading cause of death for children and youth over the age of one. The good news is that this injury death rate is declining, but boys – even as toddlers - are at considerably higher risk for injury-related death than girls. The number of youth killed in road crashes has also been declining over the last two decades. Teenagers are less likely to drink and drive, and the use of seatbelts and bicycle helmets is up. Despite declining crime rates, youth feel less safe in their own neighbourhoods than in the past, and many younger children do not feel safe while going to or from school.*

*From Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006*

Our shared physical environment impacts all aspects of the lives of Canadians and is therefore crucial to our well-being and our ability to be productive. Reducing the risks of exposure to air pollution indoors and out should be a priority. Canada has one of the highest rates in the world of greenhouse gas emissions and smog levels continue to increase each year. Clean water should be a right afforded to all Canadians regardless

of where they live. For Canada's Aboriginal communities, contaminated water is repeatedly identified as a major source of concern and perennial cause of illness<sup>5</sup>. Making the environment a priority will be a sound investment in reducing the risk of exposure to harmful contaminants which can cause life long healthcare costs for many citizens.

#### **4. Community Resources**

*Children live within the context of their communities, and many spend time participating in community activities and benefiting from community resources. A healthy community offers a variety of resources, including opportunities and physical spaces for recreation, child care, education, social clubs, family supports, and so on. Essentially, each of these resources helps provide a beneficial service or activity for children and youth in their own neighbourhoods or communities.*

*From Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006*

Community resources play an extremely important role in supporting children, youth, and their families, contributing significantly to the social infrastructure that then supports our business and economic activities. Among the key indicators of a strong and healthy social infrastructure to support Canada's global competitiveness are access to **Quality Childcare** to support workforce productivity and dependability, **Recreation** opportunities to promote physical health and positive social interactions, and **Education** opportunities to ensure that our next generation will have the high level of skills and knowledge required in an increasingly technological and knowledge-based world.

##### **4.1 Quality Childcare an Essential Support for a Productive Workforce**

We know that a critical factor for parents to successfully balance work and family life is the assurance that their children are safe and well cared for while they are at work. These families require access to reliable and high quality childcare and programming not only for their preschool children but for school age children during the critical hours before and after school. While it has been clearly established that early childhood education and care is essential for healthy child development, in 2004 regulated child care spaces were available for less than 16% of children under the age of 12. For

parents with children with disabilities, it is even more difficult to find quality care, with 55% of these families reporting that this has had a negative impact on parental employment<sup>6</sup>. While implementing the Choices in Childcare strategy, it will be critical to also sustain and enhance other early learning and child care agreements negotiated between the federal government and the provinces support Canadian families who rely on quality childcare to be able to go to work.

#### **4.2 Recreation a Key Support for Physical and Mental Health**

The benefits of recreation are well documented and the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that play and leisure are essential to healthy child development and encourages investments in recreation programs for all children. Ensuring that children and youth have safe recreational spaces not only contributes to the reduction of unintentional injury but contributes to physical wellness and student achievement. Studies show that activities outside of school have a positive impact on math and language scores and 90% of parents report that the arts motivate their children to learn. Physical activity positively impacts attention, decision making, coping with stress, and correcting mistakes, all skills required at school and in daily life. Supporting recreation programs from an early age contributes to a healthy, productive workforce, reduced healthcare costs, reduced costs associated with incarceration, social services and welfare, all of which boost our economy<sup>7</sup>.

#### **4.3 Education Critical to a Strong and Competitive Society**

*Childhood is a time of constant learning, both formal and informal. Of course, not all children experience school in the same way. There are notable regional, gender, and ethnic differences. For example, more parents of girls than boys say their child is doing very well in school, and immigrant and visible minority youth have higher educational aspirations than Canadian-born youth. And while more Aboriginal youth are completing high school, the education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth continues to widen.*

*From Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006*

Education is essential for the success of society and to create a thriving economy.

Canada, working with its Provincial and Territorial partners, needs to increase its investment in a strong system of public education for children and youth to ensure that the next generation of Canadians have all of the appropriate skills and knowledge to compete in a global economy. Strong support for primary and secondary education also ensures that our children and youth acquire the strong qualifications needed for entry to post-secondary education programs. As well, research shows that the most successful children in school are those who were nurtured and stimulated when they were toddlers and preschoolers – either at home or in early learning and child care settings, emphasizing the importance of quality childcare as cited above in 4.1.

## **5. Civic Vitality**

*Civic vitality refers to the strength of social networks in a community, region, province, or country. Do children and youth feel connected to, and included in, these networks? Or are they alienated? Do they have a positive sense of their own social or political relevance, or do they feel indifferent and disenfranchised? Do they consider themselves to be citizens? And to what extent does a sense of citizenship persist into adulthood?*

*From Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006*

A globally competitive society is one in which its citizens are engaged in their communities, participating fully in the democratic process, and supporting each other while taking personal responsibility for their own well-being. Canada needs to continue to support programs encouraging civic engagement and volunteerism through the education system, the voluntary sector, and the business community.

## **6. Health Status**

*Health status includes physical, social, and emotional health, as well as physical and social risks to well-being. Children and youth are generally considered to be at the peak of health - and in many respects that is true. Some positive trends among Canadian youth include declining smoking rates, fewer unintended pregnancies, and lower death rates. There are, however, some health concerns, including lower rates of physical activity, and higher rates of obesity, asthma, prescription drug use, and sexually transmitted infections.*

*From Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006*

The health of Canadians is an important contributor to our success as a society, directly



affecting workplace productivity and global competitiveness. While significant attention has been placed in recent years on reducing “wait times” for certain surgical procedures, exacerbated by Canada’s aging population, research shows clearly that healthy lifestyles develop from an early age. Declines in the level of physical activity combined with trends towards unhealthy eating habits pose a significant threat to the health of Canada’s children and youth and our next generation of the workforce. Canada needs to support community resources in the education and voluntary sectors which contribute to the adoption of healthy active lifestyles from a young age.

## **7. Social Engagement**

*Social engagement refers to the relationships or involvements – both positive and negative – with family members, peers, community members, local institutions, and at the broadest level, with society. Positive social relationships are important to healthy youth development. Good relationships with parents are associated with lower levels of anxiety and lower rates of smoking and alcohol use. Friendships are also important to children in a variety of ways, particularly as they get older. The Internet is now a major part of young people's social lives, providing social benefits as well as risks, such as cyber-bullying and exposure to pornography and sexual predators.*

*From Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006*

Social engagement occurs at home, at school, and through a myriad of involvements in voluntary sector organizations supporting sports, recreation, and other activities. Research shows clearly the enormous benefit of having active and engaged citizens who participate in their communities and contribute to their society’s social capital. Often, these patterns are set at an early age through family and community interactions. Research also shows that youth who volunteer are less likely to engage in risk behaviours and more likely to report high self-worth and excellent or very good self-rated health<sup>8</sup>. Child abuse and neglect, family violence, exposure to violence on television and through computer games, bullying, discrimination, and the negative aspects of internet media continue to pose significant threats to young people<sup>9</sup>. The Government of Canada must continue to support a diverse and vital community sector across the country to address these issues.

## **8. Youth Already Part of the Labour Force**

*Paid work is a major factor in young people's lives. It affects the extent to which they become independent from their parents and their ability to pursue higher education. Most Canadian youth aged 15 to 24 are in the labour force – 68% in 2004, up from 64% in 1994. However, one of every three unemployed workers is a young person, and the youth unemployment rate is double that of adults.*

*From Progress of Canada's Children and Youth, 2006*

As the next generation of Canada's adult labour force, youth are already gaining valuable experience and contributing significantly to Canada's economy as part of today's labour force<sup>10</sup>. We need to ensure that this workforce in training has a safe and positive experience that will accelerate and support their entry into the adult workforce without jeopardizing their ability to continue their education to appropriate levels.

### **Conclusion**

In addressing ***Canada's Place in a Competitive World***, we urge the House of Commons's Standing Committee on Finance to appreciate the tremendous value that today's investments in Canada's Children and Youth will have in securing our future. While competitiveness can be seen narrowly through the lens of business activity, our place in a competitive world will ultimately be the result of a successful, balanced society with strong community supports and resources. In seeking appropriate measures for Budget 2007, we encourage the committee to understand the significant collaborative role that our members and Canada's voluntary community sector play in supporting the positive development of our children and youth, the workforce of the future, and the importance of the Government of Canada's support for this work.

## Notes and References

The members of the National Children's Alliance represent a broad cross-section of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations concerned about the well-being of Canada's children and youth:

Active Healthy Kids	Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada
Allergy Asthma Information Association	First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada
Adoption Council of Canada	Frontier College
Big Brothers and Sisters of Canada	Hospital for Sick Children Foundation
Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada	International Social Service Canada (ISS Canada)
Breakfast for Learning- Canadian Living Foundation	Invest in Kids
Canadian Adolescents at Risk Research Network	Kids Help Phone
Canadian Aids Society	La Commission nationale des parents francophone
Canadian Association for Community Living	Laidlaw Foundation
Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs	Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
Canadian Association of Food Banks	Métis National Council of Women
Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance	Movement for Canadian Literacy
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists	National Anti-Poverty Organization
Canadian Association of Paediatric Health Centres	National Association of Friendship Centres
Canadian Association of Social Workers	National Youth In Care Network
Canadian Child Care Federation	Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada
Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children	Pollution Probe
Canadian Council for Refugees	Power Camp National/Filles d'Action
Canadian Council on Social Development	Safe Kids Canada
Canadian Federation for Sexual Health	Save the Children Canada
Canadian Institute of Child Health	Scouts Canada
Canadian Mental Health Association	SOS Children's Villages Canada
Canadian Nurses Association	Specialink: The National Centre for Child Care Inclusion
Canadian Paediatric Society	The Student's Commission
Canadian Parents for French	Thrive! The Canadian Centre for Positive Youth Development
Canadian Parks & Recreation Association	UNICEF Canada
Canadian Psychological Association	United Way of Canada - Centraide Canada
Canadian Public Health Association	Vanier Institute of the Family
Canadian School Boards Association	YOUCAN
Canadian Teachers' Federation	YWCA of Canada
Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada	YMCA Canada
Child Welfare League of Canada	
Family Service Canada	

<sup>1</sup> *Canada's Aging Population, Health Canada, Division of Aging and Seniors, 2002, Page 3*

<sup>2</sup> *Progress of Canada's Children and Youth 2006, CCSD, Page 5*

<sup>3</sup> *Improving the Health of Young Canadians, CPHI 2005, Page 59*

<sup>4</sup> *Progress of Canada's Children and Youth 2006, CCSD, Page 14*

<sup>5</sup> *Progress of Canada's Children and Youth 2006, CCSD, Page 24*

<sup>6</sup> *Progress of Canada's Children and Youth 2006, CCSD, Page 31,32*

<sup>7</sup> *Recreation in Middle Childhood – An Overview Paper, NCA 2006, Page 4/5*

<sup>8</sup> *Improving the Health of Young Canadians, CPHI 2005, Page 44*

<sup>9</sup> *Progress of Canada's Children and Youth 2006, CCSD, Pages 57-59*

<sup>10</sup> *Progress of Canada's Children and Youth 2006, CCSD, Pages 68-74*