

# Opportunities for Action to Improve the Mental Health of Young Children – Executive Summary

This paper was prepared for the **British Columbia Healthy Child Development Alliance (BCHCDA)**, a coalition of health, social, education, research and community organizations sharing a common interest in supporting the healthy development of all children in BC. The purpose of the Alliance is to provide leadership in encouraging and supporting the development and implementation of policies and strategies that are essential to ensuring the healthy development of all children in BC.

Infant and child mental health was chosen as a strategic focus for the Alliance in 2006. To enhance the capacity of the Alliance and partners to respond to this issue, a partnership was formed with the Child Health Policy Centre at Simon Fraser University. An initial resource paper was developed in 2007 and the current paper reflects the continuation of this work and an opportunity for the Alliance to provide a provincial voice on mental health in the context of early child development. For more information about the Alliance and previous work on this topic, visit: <http://www.childhealthbc.ca/bchcda/index.php>

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## **Background**

The foundations for good mental health through the life course are laid in early childhood. Infant and child mental health is influenced by individual, family and community level risk and protective factors. It is supported by a continuum of activities from mental health promotion, to prevention of mental health problems and disorders, to early intervention, and, when needed, to treatment services. The evidence base for interventions in early childhood indicates that infant-child mental health promotion and mental problem/disorder prevention strategies are effective in reducing risk factors associated with poor outcomes in adulthood. However, the majority of funds are dedicated to treatment services, with a fraction allotted to promotion and prevention actions.

## **Purpose**

The primary purpose of this paper is to inform the policy development process as it relates to infant and child mental health in BC. The objectives are to:

1. Provide an overview of work that has been done in BC towards the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental health problems and disorders in early childhood
2. Outline current challenges and opportunities for improvement in the provision of these services
3. Provide recommendations to support mental health promotion and prevention activities in early childhood

## **Methods**

Key informants from ECD sectors across British Columbia were interviewed and provided their perspectives on challenges and opportunities for improving approaches to infant and child mental health, including recommendations for policies and programs. Relevant literature was identified and included to supplement the interview results.

## **Findings**

- There was consensus regarding the importance and timeliness of addressing this issue. The majority of interviewees indicated a need to reorient the current health system to enhance services aimed at mental health promotion and prevention of mental health problems and disorders, including increased funding for such initiatives.
- Several interviewees indicated that a significant barrier in the planning and provision of mental health services for young children is the lack of a strong evidence base guiding practice and a need for access to research that identifies 'what works'. A lack of program outcome evaluation was also identified as a significant barrier in service planning and delivery. Many of the existing early childhood programs in BC have never been evaluated with respect to mental health outcomes, and for those that have, the primary focus has been on process measures.

- Another key issue identified by all interviewees was a need for increased collaboration within and across systems of service delivery. There was support for moving forward in partnership to provide a more coordinated, collaborative approach to meeting mental health needs within early child development.
- A majority of those interviewed also indicated that there remains a lack of understanding about the important role that early childhood social-emotional development plays in the life course. All interviewees expressed a need for service providers to be able to understand and support the emotional needs of children and families with whom they are working. As such, they also identified the need for training for service providers in infant-child mental health, specifically as it relates to supporting families to foster emotionally healthy environments.

### **Recommendations**

There was strong support for action in the following six areas:

1. Adopt a population health approach to mental health in early childhood.
  - Develop a shared vision for mental health promotion and prevention of mental health problems and disorders
  - Advocate for sustainable funds for mental health promotion and prevention activities in ECD
  - Advocate for development of healthy public policies that take action on the determinants of health
  - Designate sustainable funds to provide opportunities for all children, particularly those identified at risk, to attend culturally safe, evidence-informed, early childhood development programs
2. Utilize evidence to inform the policy and program development process.
  - Support knowledge translation efforts through development of partnerships between universities and service providers
  - Develop consensus on what constitutes evidence of effectiveness
3. Improve outcome evaluation data for mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention programs in BC.
  - Designate funds for program evaluation purposes (10% of program budget as recommended by the World Health Organization (2005)).
  - Develop capacity of providers to apply evaluation techniques
  - Identify and state mental health objectives within ECD programs
4. Enhance intersectoral collaboration on mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention initiatives in ECD.
  - Convene a formal table with membership from across ministries and health authorities for visioning and goal setting for upstream investments; clarification of roles; and, identifying service duplication in the system
5. Develop increased awareness of mental health in early childhood development.
  - Promote recognition of the importance of mental health to parents, providers and funders through education, training and media campaigns
  - Develop a coordinated, collaborative plan to provide training to service providers
6. Provide opportunities for children from identified special populations to thrive and achieve their best mental health outcomes.
  - Convene table or partner to develop a plan to meet the mental health needs of children in care, Aboriginal children, immigrant and refugee children and children with developmental delay or disability