



OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION TO IMPROVE THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG CHILDREN

**A Discussion paper prepared for the BC Healthy
Child Development Alliance**

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CONTEXT

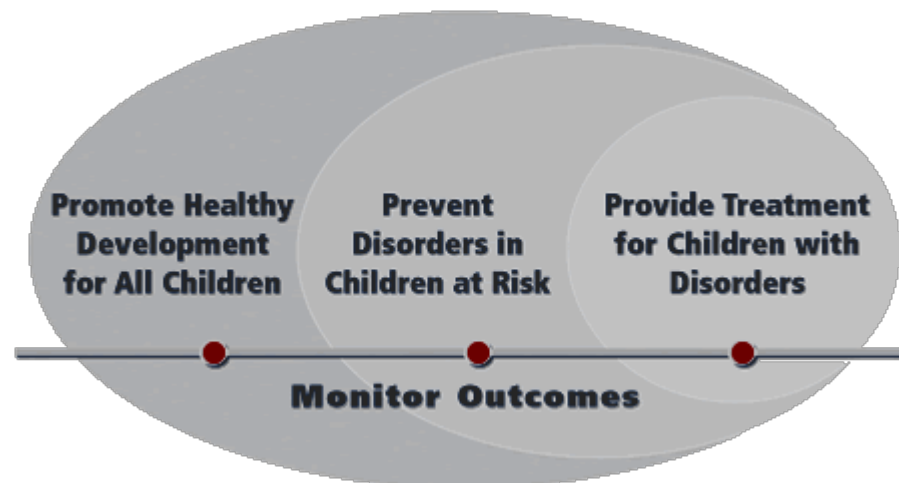
- BCHCDA identified mental health in the context of early childhood development as a priority area
- Mental Health Working Group established
- Partnership with Dr. Charlotte Waddell at the Children's Health Policy Centre, Simon Fraser University



“IMPROVING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG CHILDREN” –

WADDELL, 2007

- High prevalence of mental health problems and disorders
- Treatment-focused system not sustainable
- Proposed adoption of an integrated population health strategy for children’s mental health



PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES

- Overview of work done in BC toward the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental health problems and disorders in early childhood
- Provide perspectives on challenges and opportunities for improvement in addressing infant-child mental health within ECD
- Provide recommendations for next steps



METHODOLOGY

- Structured interviews
- Representation from key stakeholders
- Data analyzed for themes



THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS & LITERATURE

- Population health approach
- Use of evidence to inform the policy and program development process
- Outcome evaluation practices
- Intersectoral collaboration on mental health initiatives in BC
- Consideration of special populations
- Awareness of mental health in ECD



A. POPULATION HEALTH APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

“We need a new mindset...the current system only provides services to those who are really struggling”

“The system is still oriented towards treatment of identified behaviour problems”

“It’s time to take a population health focus that addresses the determinants”



POPULATION HEALTH APPROACH

- Consensus on need for increased, sustainable funding

“We must move away from short-term funding, and project grants to sustainable funds for ongoing mental health activities in ECD”

- Aligns with Waddell’s recommendation for a continuum approach to support children’s mental health



B. NEED FOR EVIDENCE IN POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

- Lack of a strong evidence base is a significant barrier

“Program development is often driven by anything but academic research. We can no longer do that.”

- Interviewees also indicated a need for access to research that identifies ‘what works’



EVIDENCE CONT'D

- Literature concurs with interview findings
- Four primary research-practice gaps:
 1. Failure to implement effective programs
 2. Impl. of harmful programs
 3. Impl. of programs with min to no effect
 4. Continued delivery of program when its effectiveness is unknown
- Partnership development is key to increased access



C. NEED FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

- All interviewees indicated that lack of program outcome evaluation data was a barrier to service planning
- Many existing programs have never been evaluated based on mental health outcomes

“The information we have now can tell us how many sessions were held or how many families attended, but not if what the program did actually worked”



EVALUATION CONT'D

“There is a need to reorient funding to give the best bang for the buck. This means stopping the funding for programs that aren't working! Often times a program continues to run because of its history, not because of its effectiveness. This is where evaluation data comes in.”



EVALUATION CONT'D

- Need for training on outcome evaluation techniques
- Need for program objectives to be explicit in stating desired mental health outcomes



D. COLLABORATION WITHIN AND ACROSS SERVICE SYSTEMS

- One of the leading issues identified by interviewees was the need for collaboration

“There has tended to be a hodgepodge of programs that lack consistency and that don’t build competency within the system.”

- Partnerships are highly valued and valuable

“I can’t imagine doing this work in ECD without the bigger picture, without the ability to pool resources. If we’re going to move forward, we need to build strong partnerships.”



E. DEVELOPING INCREASED AWARENESS OF MENTAL HEALTH IN ECD

- Lack of understanding of important role that early childhood social-emotional development plays in life course
- Stigma
- Need for service providers to foster emotionally healthy environments for children and families

“There is a desperate need for more training in infant-child mental health.”



F. POPULATIONS REQUIRING SPECIAL ATTENTION

- Interviewees identified specific populations that warrant special consideration
 - Immigrant and Refugee Children and Families
 - Aboriginal Children and Families
 - Children in Care
- The literature also identified children with special needs as a population that would benefit from special attention



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopt a population health approach to mental health in early childhood.
 - develop a shared vision for promotion and prevention initiatives
 - advocate for sustainable funds
 - advocate for healthy public policies that take action on the determinants of health
 - develop funds to provide ECE opportunities for all children



RECOMMENDATIONS CONT'D

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



RECOMMENDATIONS CONT'D

3. Improve outcome evaluation data for mental health promotion and mental problem and disorder prevention in BC
 - designate funds for program evaluation
 - develop capacity of providers to evaluate programs
 - identify and state mental health objectives within ECD programs



RECOMMENDATIONS CONT'D

4. Enhance intersectoral collaboration on mental health promotion and mental problem and disorder prevention initiatives
 - convene formal table with membership across ministries and health authorities
 - visioning and goal setting for upstream investments
 - clarification of roles
 - identify service duplication in system



RECOMMENDATIONS CONT'D

5. Develop increased awareness of mental health in early childhood development
 - promote recognition of importance of mental health to parents, providers, and funders
 - develop a coordinated, collaborative plan to provide training to service providers



RECOMMENDATIONS CONT'D

6. Provide opportunities for children from identified special populations to flourish and achieve their best mental health outcomes.
-convene table or partner with existing table to develop plan to meet the mental health needs of children in care, Aboriginal children, Immigrant and Refugee children, and children with special needs



SUMMARY

- Opportunity to move beyond discussion to action
- Building on strengths:
 - Early Childhood Development in BC: First Call's Framework for Action
 - Child and Youth Mental Health Plan
 - BC Early Years Strategic Plan
 - 10 Year Plan to Address Mental Health and Substance Use in BC
 - HELP
 - Children's Health Policy Centre at SFU
 - Existing programs

