A Policy Framework

for

Middle Childhood

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Introduction

The well-being of children in middle childhood is determined by complex interactions between personal and developmental characteristics, social and economic factors, and physical environments. An ecological approach to children's development and well-being explains that children are affected by the environments within which they live and grow. Research in human development has clearly demonstrated that children are affected by a wide variety of family, neighbourhood, community, and broader social influences.

Communities in Eastern Ontario, after identifying gaps in services, programs and policies for children in their middle years, developed a framework to identify developmental assets and needs for middle childhood. This framework – outlined in ***Middle Childhood Matters: A Framework to Promote Healthy Development of Children 6 to 12*** – focuses on four key elements of healthy development – meeting fundamental needs; stable and nurturing relationships; opportunities to develop competencies; and safe and caring environments.[1]

These elements of healthy development are influenced by the three major environments that children are surrounded by:

- **Families** - The family continues to be a major influence. Nurturing, supportive families and positive, consistent parenting styles have been demonstrated to have a strong influence on healthy child development. Furthermore, family income, and social and educational status and employment experiences all influence children's development.
- **Schools** - The transition to middle childhood is marked by entry into formal education – so the school now becomes a major influencing factor in their lives.
- **Communities** - These children begin to reach out to other community resources. Participation in recreation, arts, club activities and playing or 'hanging around' with their peers, all begin to play an increasingly important role in their lives. Families continue to rely on community resources to share in providing care and supervision when children are not in school. Middle childhood is that period in life when the child leaves the security of his or her family and independently enters the external world.

The following proposed framework for policy development brings together these key environments and the developmental elements from ***Middle Childhood Matters: A Framework to Promote Healthy Development of Children 6 to 12*** and identifies priority areas for policy initiatives as suggested by the research of the National Children's Alliance and its members.

The list of research documents reviewed and synthesized for the purposes of this paper are listed in Appendix 1 along with those cited in the endnotes.

Proposed Policy Framework for Middle Childhood

Adapted from Middle Childhood Matters: A Framework to Promote Healthy Development of Children 6 to 12.

Four Key Elements	Evidence	Policy Implications		
		Families	**Schools**	**Communities**
Meeting Fundamental Needs	Meeting fundamental needs is essential to healthy development. The physical, emotional, cognitive and social development of children in the middle years is decreased when their families are poor, they are malnourished, they live in poor housing, and have limited access to proper health care.	Income security Nutrition and food security Stable and secure housing	School nutrition programs	Community-based food programs Community supports/services for children and families who are vulnerable Health care and mental health services
Stable and Nurturing Relationships	Positive, stable and caring relationships with family members, peers and other adults in the community are critically important in middle childhood. Relationships can act as a protective factor which leads to greater opportunities for children to reach their optimum potential.	Supports for the parenting role	Mentoring	Mentoring
Safe and Caring Environments	When children live in secure homes, schools, neighbourhoods and communities they are more likely to develop in a positive, healthy way. Such environments are respectful, supportive and engaging and have the necessary resources to provide security.	Child care support Employment programs for parents Family friendly workplaces	Environments that promote school attachment	Safe play spaces Before- and after-school programs Clean and safe environments Child protection
Opportunity to Develop Competencies	All children are unique and have different abilities and strengths. Opportunities to develop and enhance these abilities and strengths will not only improve their overall development but also make them more resilient to risk factors that they may encounter. Children have a greater chance of reaching their optimal potential when they have access and opportunity to engage in stimulating environments, experiences and interactions that support and promote their individual capacities and capabilities.	Adequate resources to access programs Parents' awareness	Academic, arts, culture and recreation (including physical activity) programs Integration of information technology and media Environments that enable children to be engaged in learning	Recreation, arts and culture programs Participation in/engagement in community resources

Meeting Fundamental Needs

Family

I. Income security

In spite of economic recovery and parental employment, not all families and children have reaped the economic benefits. A substantial number of children in the middle years live in poverty. While the rate of child poverty in Canada declined during the late 1990s and into the new millennium, largely due to economic growth and social investment, progress has stalled in recent years.[2] The depth of poverty remains stubbornly high and in some cases is increasing.[3] The inequality gap is increasing – further marginalizing the poorest children.   Many families in the lowest income group are recent immigrants, visible minorities, Aboriginal people, lone-parent families headed by women, and people with disabilities.[4] The polarization has also affected the middle class – they did not recover after the last recession.

Examples – policies and programs

The **National Child Benefit (NCB)** is a partnership among the federal, provincial and territorial governments (except Quebec) and First Nations. It combines monthly benefits to families with children under 18 and benefits and services designed and delivered by the provinces and territories. It includes the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB), a monthly tax-free benefit for low- and moderate-income families. It also includes the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS) to provide extra income to parents involved in low-paid work – targeted to the poorest of working families; and transitional benefits for families who move from social assistance to employment – varying by jurisdiction and income-tested.

Eligibility to the CCTB structures eligibility for a number of provincial child benefits. Some provinces decided to reduce social assistance benefits by the amount of the NCBS – or "claw back" income. The Government of Canada also has reinvestment commitments to First Nations under the NCB.

The **GST/HST credit** is a tax-free benefit paid to individuals and families with low and moderate incomes. It is intended to offset all or part of the Goods and Services Tax/Harmonized Sales Tax (GST/HST).

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) **Resettlement Assistance Program** for government assisted refugees provides income support and a range of essential services. Clients who are not self sufficient at the end of the period of this support are entitled to provincial/territorial assistance. RAP benefits are adjusted in the same manner as social assistance benefits in
those jurisdictions that have chosen this type of approach.

II. Nutrition and food security

Nutrition and food security are essential influences to the healthy development of children during the middle years. Proper diets with the required nutrients contribute to a child's overall well-being. When children experience food insecurity or do not have access to nutritionally balanced and appropriate diets, they are more susceptible to physical illness and greater likelihood of obesity. In addition, their mental, social and emotional development is affected. Their ability to learn and succeed in school are also at risk.[5]

Access to affordable food that is nutritious is essential in order to provide nutrition for children and families. However, policies that ensure adequate and equitable income, accessible child care and affordable housing all ultimately affect access to nutritious food.

Examples – policies and programs

Policies that **protect the price of food staples** such as milk, bread and fresh fruits and vegetables enable families to better afford to feed their children nutritious foods.[6]

III. Stable and secure housing

In light of the increasing cost of housing in Canada, and the decreasing government commitments to affordable housing, there are a significant number of children who live in unaffordable or inadequate housing.[7] There is ample evidence on the effects of inadequate and insecure housing on child development. Children that live in inadequate/insecure housing are more at-risk of poor health, asthma, poor school performance, aggressive and other anti-social behaviours.[8]

Examples – policies and programs

In Saskatchewan, the Action Plan for Children identified **adequate housing** as fundamental to all families and communities. It invested in improved housing in northern communities and its "Homes Now" program provides funds to renovate existing social housing. Through the Neighbourhood Home Ownership program, the province works with municipalities and community groups to provide financial assistance to help low-income families acquire and modify existing homes in selected inner-city neighbourhoods. There is also a neighbourhood development component that aims to help revitalize low-income neighbourhoods.[9]

The Winnipeg **Housing and Homelessness Initiative** is a tripartite partnership of the governments of Canada, Manitoba and the City of Winnipeg to address declining housing stock in designated inner city neighbourhoods in Winnipeg and homelessness. It provides single window access by local community organizations to a number of federal, provincial and city programs.[10]

School

I. School nutrition programs

Student diversity extends beyond language, culture and religion. Some children have special needs at school because they are poor.[11] The quality of many Canadian children's diets is poor. More than 24% of children in Grade 4 do not eat breakfast every day; by Grade 8, 47% of girls and 33% of boys do not eat breakfast daily.[12]

Children cannot learn well when they are hungry. While good nutrition enhances a child's ability to learn, poor nutrition results in cognitive impairment. A child who is hungry has difficulty concentrating, is more easily distracted and may exhibit behavioural problems. A hungry or under-nourished child cannot take full advantage of education opportunities and may disrupt other children from learning as well.[13]

With the stubborn levels of child poverty in Canada, and the increasing depth of that poverty, schools have had to grapple with how to educate hungry children.

Examples – policies and programs

Breakfast for Learning (BFL) provides f**unds, nutrition education resources and program support to student nutrition programs** in Canada and has operated for 14 years. BFL supports a network of programs in 5,000 communities across the country. Almost all of these programs are in elementary schools. BFL follows a community development model in which programs are created and managed locally by teams of parents, educators, public health and local government and business representatives to meet the needs of local children and families.[14]

In Ontario, the **Healthy Foods and Beverages in Elementary School Vending Machines** program, requires school boards to report to their district office of the Ministry of Education on their progress in achieving the recommended standards in the selection of foods and beverages sold through vending machines in their elementary schools. This is in accordance with the Education Act. [15]

Community

I. Community-based food programs

Since 1989, there has been a steady increase in the number of Canadians using food banks and the number of food banks in communities. In 2004, over half of food bank users (55%) were families with children. The proportion of children and youth under 18 using food banks rose from 38% in 1989 to 42% by 2004. Working poor people are increasingly using food banks – particularly in large urban areas where the costs of living are high and work has become less able to support families.[16]

Examples – policies and programs

Food Banks are central warehouses or clearing houses, which are registered as a non-profit organization for the purpose of collecting, storing and distributing food, free of charge, directly or through front line agencies which may also provide meals to the hungry. There are 550 food banks in Canada – in all provinces and territories. Food banks may also coordinate advocacy, public education and employment programs, as part of the effort to eliminate hunger. In addition, over 2,500 affiliated agencies also regularly receive a supply of groceries from a central food bank for direct distribution to the public. Grocery Programs distribute groceries from food banks to the public. Food "hampers" or bags of groceries are provided with enough food for several days. Meal Programs are also operated which distribute prepared meals to the public. They are operated by food banks, or another agencies, such as soup kitchens, hostels or shelters.[17]

The Canadian Association of Food Banks recommends that while Canada's food banks will continue to do their part to meet the immediate needs of hungry people, without policy changes that address economic security, people will continue to rely on food banks. They state that: "Private charities and food banks are not the solution. [We must pursue] effective solutions to eradicate poverty and food insecurity." [18]

II. Access to community supports/services for children and families who are vulnerable

Families who are most vulnerable benefit from communities that are inclusive and cohesive, and has available a range of supports. *"Many families face situations that make them feel vulnerable and unprotected. How a community supports families during these times impacts how the family is able to stabilize itself. When a community empowers the family, while offering supports, a family is able to gain its balance and begin to function at a more healthy degree"*[19]. Families need access to an array of services in their communities – preventive and health care services; family and crisis counselling; respite care programs; community-based parenting and after-school programs; social networks which promote social cohesion.

Examples – policies and programs

In Quebec, the **family-oriented community action financial assistance program** offers three measures of financing. One

measure is aimed at promoting the action of family-oriented community organizations (FCOs) and providing financing to support their overall mission. The program allows FCOs to have the organizational means they need to carry out their mission and complements contributions by the community and other funding sources.

III. Access to health care and mental health services

The extent to which children have access to health care providers and services – preventive, health promoting and curative/treatment services – is dependent on the resources available to the family and the community. One of the strongest predictors of access to services and health professionals is a household's income level and whether the family has health care insurance. Families who are living in poverty are more likely to experience difficulties accessing health care and mental health services.[20]

Access to mental health services is particularly important for children in the middle years. An estimated 1.1 million – or 14 per cent – of Canada's children under age 20 have mental health conditions that affect their lives at home, at school and in the community, but only 1 in 6 of those with problems receive mental health services.[21] [22] The recently released Senate Report on mental health *Out of the Shadows at Last-Transforming Mental Health Mental Illness and Addictions Services in Canada* (known as the Kirby Report) particularly highlighted the prevalence of mental health disorders among children and the very limited capacity of the mental health system to respond to these needs.

In order to provide access to health services – including mental health services – they need to be offered in the communities and schools where children and families are. A continuum of health promoting, prevention and treatment services are essential and they must include those that are universal, targeted and more clinically focused.[23] Services need to be flexible, welcoming, non-judgmental, and accessible – e.g., close to families, affordable/free, flexible hours, culturally relevant, and accessible to children and families with disabilities. They need to be provided in partnerships – for example, between communities and schools.

Examples – policies and programs

A number of jurisdictions are using an **Integrated Service Delivery** model. This takes advantage of schools as sites or hubs for programs and services but uses the expertise of different sectors to deliver them. It does not mean that already over-burdened educators are doing the work of other professionals. Instead, such a model educates teachers and students about mental health issues, and engages mental health professionals to work with children and youth on an ongoing basis, funded by one or more ministries. It has the advantage of locating services for children and youth right where they spend their time; uses excess space in under-enrolled schools; and has the potential to involve additional partners who work with children and youth in other related areas such as physical health, recreation, the arts, parenting, and so on.[24]

Safe and Caring Environments

Family

I. Employment programs

Most families are now working families. The vast majority of mothers of children in middle childhood are in the workforce, and, most mothers work full-time. There is evidence that parents are experiencing increasing work-family life conflict – and that can influence relationships between parents and children, and ultimately, children's development. Changes in the labour force – such as the precarious forms of employment and decreased access to employment insurance – have contributed to this stress. While recent overall job indicators in Canada look positive, they hide a fundamental restructuring of the Canadian economy where full-time jobs are being replaced by more precarious jobs and where parts of the country are experiencing boom times, while in other regions, unemployed workers are unable to find good jobs. Parents find themselves faced with more temporary work, contract work and seasonal jobs.[25]

Examples – policies and programs

> While **maternal and parental leave** is a policy that clearly influences young children, as families have subsequent children, the opportunity for parental leave better enables parents to provide for their children and to care for all of them.
>
> Federal paid maternity and parental leaves are available for new parents who qualify for Employment Insurance (EI). Only those new mothers and new parents who have worked sufficient hours can claim a paid leave. The maximum period for paid leave was extended to 50 weeks in 2000. There is a federal Compassionate Care Benefit, again within the employment insurance program. They are available to those who have achieved the necessary eligibility, and are meant to provide paid leave to care for a seriously ill relative expected to die within six months. Families receiving the Canadian Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) and have Employment Insurance are eligible for a Family Supplement. The right to take an unpaid leave to care for a newborn or adopted child is regulated by provincial and territorial governments through their employment standards legislation. Many more parents are eligible to take unpaid leave, with a guarantee that their job (or a similar one) will be held for them, than are eligible for paid leave through EI. The conditions of eligibility vary across the 13 jurisdictions.

II. Child care support

Schools occupy an important part of the day among children in this age group, but not all of it. There is often a significant gap between official school hours and parents' work hours – this has resulted in the phenomenon of 'latch-key' children.[26] Ironically, it's just at the stage that children need quality child care the most – when parent participation in the labour force surges (in 2003, 60% of the children with mothers in the paid work force were in the 6 to 12 age range) – that the minimal community and policy supports to child care collapse.[27]

According to Canadian research parents make many different arrangements for after-school care for their children – including informal arrangements with neighbours, regulated family child care, municipal after-school programs, recreation activities or child care centres in schools.[28] Cost is a major factor influencing access to quality child care arrangements for school-age children.

Strong public policy in terms of school-age care can help families meet the fundamental needs of their children. If affordable accessible care is available, parents can take part in the workforce and be able to provide nutritious meals, safe and stable housing, and health services.[29]

Examples – policies and programs

> The only province that has a formal program of **child care** for children in the middle years is Québec. (The federal government provides The Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), which provides parents with $100, for each child under six.) Quebec has integrated school-age child care into its overall family policy up to age 12. It is funded under the $7/day program and the administration falls under the auspices of the department of education. In other provinces there have been some efforts to bridge the silos that currently exist between the education and child care systems. Manitoba has developed a policy to support partnerships between the school system and child care centres. Ontario, through its new Best Start initiative is working towards a "seamless day," using schools as community hubs where children attend preschools and after-school programs in neighbourhood school settings, and benefit from close collaboration between teachers and child care practitioners.[30]

III. Family friendly workplaces

There is a growing need for employers to acknowledge and respond to the strain their employees experience if they feel torn between work and family life. The benefits of family-friendly workplaces are far-reaching. As employees fell less stress, burnout, depression and an increased sense of calmness, the conflict felt between work and home-life can decrease. This can create a positive family relationship and increase a child's ability to reach his or her optimal potential. It also improves the parent's performance both at home and at work.[31]

Examples – policies and programs

> Examples of **family friendly workplaces** are those where employers provide employees with more flexibility around the hours of work and place of work – for example, flextime and telework. Employers can develop criteria under which these flexible arrangements can be used that are mutually agreed upon and transparent. There needs to be mutual accountability around their use (i.e. employees need to meet job demands but organizations should be flexible with respect to how work is arranged). The process for changing hours of work or the location of work should, wherever possible, is flexible.[32]

School

I. Environments that promote school attachment – a positive school climate

Children who are strongly connected to schools have better mental health than those who are not. A high level of school connectedness is characterized by a strong sense of belonging and involvement. Furthermore, students with strong connections with school are more likely to be better students and to plan to complete post-secondary education.[33]

Schools with a positive climate empower children. They create a sense of ownership, belonging and cooperation for their children and the community.[34] Teachers who are engaged in the school and show an interest in the students will positively influence student academic achievement and engagement. [35] [36]

Canadian children in middle childhood are not homogeneous – they are a diverse group, representing the diversity of Canadian society – and have become increasingly more diverse. For example, over 5% of children in the middle years are Aboriginal – and this population is growing.[37] The number of school-aged children who have come to Canada from other countries has also increased – resulting in an increasing proportion of our Canadian population of children in the middle years being recent immigrants.[38] A positive school climate supports this diversity.

Examples – policies and programs

Schools with a **positive climate** have a number of characteristics. They: set high, achievable goals; enable children to be successful; provide educational supports; and enable parental involvement. They mentor and model the following attitudes and values – warm, being supportive, non-judgmental, respectful; safety; [39] They have teachers who are engaged in the school and show an interest in the children.[40]

The Ministry of Education in British Columbia has an **Open Boundaries** program – which is based on a policy encouraging school boards to meet the diverse needs of their students by offering specialty programs or developing 'magnet schools' whenever possible. School boards are required to establish catchment areas around schools in their districts, meaning that local children get first consideration for places at their neighbourhood school.[41]

In Prince Edward Island, the **Diversity Education Standing Committee** coordinates, reports, reviews and advises on issues related to diversity equity education. Initiative include education projects, teacher training opportunities in inclusive education and differentiated instruction, panel discussions, school initiatives in diversity and equity education and resources. The Committee is administered by the Department of Education in partnership with the PEI Multicultural Association, PEI Race Relations Education Association, PEI Newcomers to Canada Association, the University of Prince Edward Island and the Department of Canadian Heritage. [42]

Community

I. Safe play spaces

Children and youth need safe places to play in their communities. Children are more likely to increase their participation in activities that lead to healthy development, have higher school achievement and pro-social behaviour when they have access to safe neighbourhoods, parks, playgrounds and places to play.[43] Families need community places where they can comfortably and safely participate with their children. Parks, playgrounds and community that are safe and supervised enable children to explore and play according to their development without risk of harm.[44]

Furthermore, public parks and community centres are good for cities and communities. They revitalize urban cores and attract residents, helping to limit urban sprawl. On the other hand, neighbourhoods which are considered unsafe for children to play in by themselves and neighbourhoods with high crime rates, environmental risks and other unsafe situations put children at risk of cognitive, behavioural and emotional problems.[45]

Examples – policies and programs

In British Columbia, the **Safe Streets and Safe Schools** Grant provides funding to support schools and communities in strategies that enhance public safety and local crime prevention efforts. The program encourages the development of best practices and innovative strategies that expand or increase problem solving approaches to crime and build capacity for community safety at the local level.[46]

In Manitoba **Neighbourhoods Alive!** Is a long-term, community based, social and economic development strategy funded through Manitoba Intergovernmental Affairs and Trade. It supports and encourages community-driven revitalization efforts in designated neighbourhoods in a number of key areas including recreation and safety and crime prevention. [47]

The Canadian Standards Association (CSA) has developed a **standard** for the design, installation and maintenance of **public play equipment** which, if adhered to, should minimize children's risk of death and injury from playground mishaps. Some jurisdictions now require day cares, school and parks to immediately upgrade their existing facilities to the CSA standard or remove non-compliant equipment.[48]

II. Clean and healthy environments

Children need clean and healthy environments. They are at particular risk from environmental hazards because their systems are still developing, they spend more time outside, play closer to the ground, are more likely to put things in their mouths and they breathe more rapidly and deeply. They are smaller in size than adults, which can result in a greater concentration of toxins in their bodies. They are exposed to higher levels of toxins and pollutants than previous generations, and studies indicate that damage from toxins and pollution begin as early as in the womb. The risks from toxins and pollution include neurodevelopment effects, cancers and respiratory illness.[49]

Examples – policies and programs

In 1991, Hudson, Quebec became the first Canadian jurisdiction to **ban** the use of cosmetic **pesticides** on both public and private property. Over the last decade, municipalities of all sizes have followed suit. Today, about 70 municipalities have adopted pesticide by-laws in some form, with the largest being the City of Toronto (population 2.5 million) and the smallest being Saint-Paule, Quebec, with a population under 200.When all the current regulations and by-laws come into full effect, it is estimated that over 11 million Canadians – approximately 35% of the population – will be protected from exposure to synthetic lawn and garden pesticides. In 2002, the federal Pest Control Products Act was passed to amend the way pesticides are regulated in Canada. By the spring of 2006, the Act was still not in force.[50]

The responsibility for the protection of health and the environment is jointly held by Health Canada and Environment Canada. Because no particular agency is dedicated to and responsible for children's environmental health, activities are dispersed across existing departments. Although action on children's environmental health issues is limited and very slow, there are encouraging signs of opportunity and change. Efforts are underway to address the enormous backlog list of **chemicals** that need evaluation and child health considerations are included in those evaluations. Health Canada is also reviewing critical federal health protection legislation such as the Hazardous Products Act.[51]

Provincial governments monitor air quality, run programs for waste disposal and regulate industrial emissions to air and water. Provincial laws and standards generally focus on "end-of-pipe" controls rather than on the prevention of hazardous emissions. There are some small signs of change. For example, some provinces are exploring **alternative environmental management tools** that emphasize shared environmental responsibility between governments and industry.[52]

Within schools, school boards and early learning and child care settings indoor air quality tends to be the primary issue and some, but not many, school boards have implemented progressive policies to reduce chemical exposures. The Toronto Catholic District School Board for example, has implemented a **pest control program** based on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) principles. This approach carefully matches pest control responses to the nature and extent of the problem and considers chemical spraying only as a last resort, subject to approval from the board's Occupational Health and Safety Department.[53]

III. Before- and after-school supports

Schools occupy an important part of children's lives – however, they do not consume all of their time. There is often a significant gap between official school hours and the hours that parents work. While the research on after-school programs is still developing, evaluations of the effects of these programs is indicating that after-school programs can make appositive difference in the lives of young people.[54][55]

It is of no surprise that the effects are greatest for those children who are in greatest need and who have the least number of options – for example, those who live in low-income, children in urban or high-crime neighbourhoods, younger children and boys.[56][57] As one would expect, the quality of the programs will determine their benefits. It appears that dosage matters—those who attend the most hours over the most years benefit more than participants who come less often or over a short period of time.[58][59] Children can develop stable and nurturing relationships with peers and with caring adults in a quality school-age program. If well integrated with school and community services, it encourages a sense of belonging to the school and neighbourhood. A well-developed curriculum in a school-age program provides children opportunities to develop competencies during this critical period as they begin to define their identities. Often school-age child care includes physical and arts activities that are not covered in the school day or that parents cannot afford to provide otherwise.[60]

Examples – policies and programs

Quebec is the only province that has after-school programs integrated into a province-wide child care program. After-school care is provided as part of the $7 a day program.

Safe, supervised and enriching **after-school programs** are provided by Boys and Girls Clubs from coast to coast. The Boys and Girls Club has entered into a partnership with Sears Canada, who provide grants each year to clubs across the country to enhance their after-school programs. Excellence in Action: A Guide to Best Practices in After-School Programs is a manual that provides program information and tips for professional program facilitators and is available to youth-serving organizations across Canada.

IV. Child protection

Abuse and neglect can have lasting effects on the health of children in both the long- and short-term. When children grow up in a violence-free environment, with healthy relationships, they are more likely to reach their optimal potential. Children suffer abuse and who witness family violence are more likely to be withdrawn and to suffer from mental health problems and difficulties learning.[61]

Examples – policies and programs

> The Constitution Act grants provinces and territories the authority to operate **child welfare systems** to intervene, when necessary, and to set legislation to govern those systems. The purpose of provincial and territorial child welfare systems is to protect the safety and well-being of children. For example:
>
> - In Saskatchewan, the Department of Community Resources' Child and Family Services Division oversees the quality and delivery of child welfare services. The service delivery system consists of five main regions which have offices located in 22 communities, staffed by provincial social workers. In addition, the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs provides funding for 18 First Nations Child and Family Services agencies, delegated by the province to provide child protection services to children and families on reserves. First Nations agencies are directed by Tribal Councils and community members.[62]
> - In Ontario, there are 53 child welfare agencies, most of which are called Children's Aid Societies. These organizations have the legal responsibility to investigate reports that a child may be in need of protection due to maltreatment or risk of maltreatment by his/her caregivers. Together, these agencies cover the entire province.[63]

Aboriginal children occupy a unique position in the Canadian child welfare system. From a social perspective, Aboriginal families experience many disadvantages related to poverty and a history of discrimination. At the same time, the special rights and legal status of Aboriginal people are recognized in Canadian legislation, and government child welfare policies increasingly have provisions that give

Aboriginal people control over child welfare services for Aboriginal children. First Nations and Aboriginal child and family service agencies have evolved amid a lengthy history of disputes between the federal government, provincial/territorial governments, and First Nations governments. Across Canada, there is considerable variation in the authority that Aboriginal communities exert over the delivery of child welfare services to their communities, ranging from the provision of support services before and after child welfare investigations to authority over providing a full range of services on reserves and, in a few cases, off reserves. The present federal government funding methodology to support First Nations child and family service agencies to deliver child welfare services on reserve has been broadly criticized for encouraging the apprehension of First Nation children and placement in care.[64]

Stable and Nurturing Relationships

Family

I. Supports for the parenting role

Parenting matters in the middle years. Effective parenting improves the developmental trajectories of children as they continue on through adolescence and into young adulthood – and impacts the emotional, behavioural, social and learning outcomes of children.[65] Furthermore, we know that effective parenting is a protective factor against a number of negative influences – for example, against the negative effects of poverty, living in high-risk neighbourhoods or having a psychological or physical problem.[66] Positive, effective and engaged parenting, cohesive families and parents who are mentally healthy can increase school-age children's resources and coping skills.[67]

Examples – policies and programs

In British Columbia **Family Support Services** provide programs on healthy growth and development including promotion of resiliency, health education, referrals, youth clinic services and injury prevention programs. Community schools provide programs such as parenting education classes. The British Columbia Council for Families offers documents on parenting.[68]

St. Christopher House is a multi-service centre in Toronto which delivers a wide range of services to people of all ages in the community. The philosophy which guides their approach is that **parenting is not solely a private responsibility**. Parents fulfill a critically important role within society by raising the next generation. They recognize that even when parents have the best interests of their children at heart they often lack the resources they need to fulfill their parenting responsibilities. The Community Parents Outreach Program locates socially-isolated parents and links them with existing resources; helps them navigate the school, healthcare and legal systems and helps advocate for improved services. Other programs help parents acquire skills either directly or indirectly by fostering supportive networks and providing opportunities for skill development. Parenting workshops help to improve parents' skills and knowledge about a wide range of subjects such as child development, discipline and nutrition. Program advisory committees give parents the opportunity to provide input to programming and, on occasion, develop advocacy projects aimed at improving social conditions in the community.[69]

School

I. Mentoring programs

School-based mentoring programs can also play a significant role in providing mentoring relationships for some children – particularly those who are at-risk.

Examples – policies and programs

Big Brothers Big Sisters also has **in-school mentoring** programs across the country. These programs are provided in partnership with schools. Mentors are caring and responsible volunteers aged 19 and over, and they provide mentoring support to a child one hour a week during the school year. They act as role models, provide friendship, guidance and sharing. [70]

Community

I. Environments that provide sustained relationships with caring adults, mentors

The relationships that young people form with adults in their families and communities are critical for their well-being. A close and sustained personal relationship with a caring adult has a very positive impact upon young people. Families are important sources of such a relationship. Community-based mentoring programs can play a significant role in providing that relationship for some children – particularly those who are at-risk.

Having at least one loving adult influences development in the middle years in a number of ways – particularly emotionally and behaviourally. It also helps vulnerable children become more resilient. A nurturing adult influences children through mentoring, modeling positive behaviours and being supportive.[71] There is good evidence that indicates mentoring programs positively influence children's school performance, behaviour and self-esteem.[72] An evaluation of Big Brothers, Big Sisters (US)[73] provided the most conclusive and wide-ranging evidence that one-on-one mentoring alone can make a difference in the lives of youth. Three important characteristics of successful mentoring relationships are longevity of the relationship; frequency of contact; and the perceptions of the relationships by the youth.[74]

> ### *Examples – policies and programs*
>
> Big Sisters Big Brothers Canada provides a variety of **mentoring** programs for children in the community. For example, Big Sisters and Big Brothers provide one-on-one mentoring for children aged 6 to 16. Life Skills Mentoring involves two separate group mentoring programs for adolescent boys and girls respectively. 'Right For Me' is for boys between the ages of 11 and 13 who are facing the difficulty of adolescent development. It is a group program, with adult volunteers leading the weekly sessions. Topics of discussion include peer pressure, problem solving skills, body image, alcoholism and careers. 'Life Choices' is the counterpart of 'Right For Me'. It is designed for adolescent girls, and focuses on self esteem development. Led by an adult volunteer, the weekly sessions include topics such as decision making, values, problem solving skills, body image and careers. [75]

Opportunities to develop competencies

Family

I. Supports for parents

Parents have a strong influence on their children's development. In order to enable their children to develop a range of competencies, parents need access to the fundamental needs supports and supports for their roles as parents, as has been already seen. They need the financial resources to enable their children to access programs in their community; they need access to information so that they know about the resources available; and they need support in their work as parents so that they can positively support their child's achievements and help them overcome their obstacles.

School

I. Academic, arts, culture and recreation (including physical activity) programs

Schools have the potential to enable children to develop the skills they need to learn and the competencies in a variety of areas. Educators agree that while the curriculum should not be overcrowded with too many expectations, it should include the variety of subject areas from the arts to physical education to science and technology to ensure that all students find their place to learn and develop emotionally and socially.[76]

In Canada, recent trends in education have seen two important developments – accountability in the form of standardized testing and funding restraints.[77] This has resulted in a focus on test scores with negative effects on individual students, on classrooms – it has been said that in some communities as the goal of education has become to get high ranks or scores.[78] At the same time, many provinces have reduced education funding. These two factors have resulted in a narrowing in the curriculum – "disadvantaging children's ability to be successful at school and in life".[79] Many curriculum components such as the arts and physical activity have been cut back or abandoned. Links with the broader community have been attenuated as schools have been forced to charge higher fees for the use of school premises. Cuts to school transportation budgets have reduced co-curricular activities.[80]

Examples – policies and programs

In Manitoba, the **K to S4 Physical Education/Health Education program,** funded through Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, offers a combined curriculum of physical education and health education. It takes a connected approach to learning about the mind and body that promotes healthy and active living.[81]

II. Integration of information technology and media

Information and communication technology is changing both what is taught in schools and how students learn. Schools can provide an environment where children can learn the information technology skills that they need. However, this requires a substantial investment by schools and departments of education – in hardware and networks, software and curriculum, and in teacher training.[82]

Examples – policies and programs

Provinces have **revised their curricula** to prepare students with information technology skills and to participate in the "knowledge-based economy".[83] For example, Ontario's K-12 curriculum teaches science and technology. Alberta's Information and Communication Technology program of studies is structured as a "curriculum within a curriculum using the core subjects of English Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies as a base". British Columbia and Alberta have developed "technology outcomes" expected of their students, which make it clear that the skills to be acquired are those expected of citizens as well as workers.[84]

III. Environments that enable children to be engaged in learning

Research shows that children and youth who are engaged in learning tend to learn more and are more willing to pursue knowledge. It affects their education and career goals. They are more likely to identify with their school and participate in school activities.[85] A supportive and positive learning environment at school will enable children and youth to explore and test their abilities, improve their skill level and experience success.[86] There are a number of factors that support engagement in learning – parental involvement in school life, homework, etc.; mentoring programs; supportive, positive school environments; learning supports; and recreation programs in schools. [87] [88]

Examples – policies and programs

Through the support of Fidelity Investments Canada, Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada has created Power Up!, an **academic enhancement program** that aims to help children and youth develop positive attitudes and practices about learning and doing well in school, and encourages a life-long interest in learning. Power Up! provides the tools and environment necessary for young people to learn to set academic goals and create a plan for achieving those goals and become actively engaged and self-directed in their learning. Students participating in the program have access to adult/youth volunteer tutors and mentors who support them in achieving their learning goals and they receive recognition for their participation and achievements in the program.

Community

I. Recreation, arts and culture

There is good evidence that participation in recreation is important for children's development. Participation fosters active citizenship and social inclusion, improves physical and mental health, increases self-esteem and encourages better academic performance. Those activities that involve elements of instruction, choice and skill development are particularly important. [89] [90] Recreation is particularly protective for those children who are most vulnerable. For example, recreation contributes to maintaining the competence of children with emotional and behavioural disorders. [91] There are groups of children who do not access arts and recreation programs – and often they are those who would benefit the most. Poor children are less likely to participate in all forms of recreation than are those who are well off. [92] [93] Children with disabilities are less likely to participate in recreation than are those who do not have disabilities.[94] [95] [96] We have evidence that many Canadian children are not participating in physical activity. Less than half of Canada's children meet the minimum daily physical activity requirements to support basic healthy growth and development.[97]

Recreation and arts programs need to be universal and financially accessible. They need to be structured for full participation. There also need to be targeted programs for those who have difficulty accessing. There have been a number of barriers to participation in recreation identified recently in Canada. These include costs of programs – often due to increasing user fees; limited programming; and lack of transportation.[98] [99]

Examples – policies and programs

The quality of recreation programs is important. Five elements for quality recreation for school-aged children have been identified which are based on healthy child development.[100] These elements are: participation – where children make choices, have a voice and do things by and for themselves; play that stresses fun, creativity and cooperation; providing the opportunity for mastery, that is activities and tasks that make children feel they are important and succeeding; developing friends; and having caring, positive and supportive relationships with adults.

In Saskatchewan, **Annual and Summer Grants** through the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Recreation are provided to non-government organizations so that vulnerable children and youth can participate in programs.[101]

The **community plays a key partnership role in providing learning opportunities for children – together with schools**. Youth-serving organizations, civic and human services, non-profit groups, faith-based organization, recreation departments, libraries, museums and businesses can provide formal and informal learning opportunities that supplement and complement school and expressing a commitment to be held accountable for certain academic and non-academic outcomes.[102]

II. Participation in/engagement in community resources

Research demonstrates that communities do matter for children.[103] [104] Children and youth who are engaged in their communities benefit – engagement has been linked to positive behavioural outcomes, self-esteem and confidence. It provides young people with the opportunity to develop competence and leadership skills.[105] [106] [107] It is critical that the community resources be of high quality, consistent and persistent, and respond to the needs of the youth.

III. Integration of information technology and media

Children in the middle years are growing up in the new world of information technology – that continues to explode and change in ways many could not anticipate. These children are taking advantage of information technology – by accessing the Internet in increasing numbers for school work and projects, to engage with other young people in chat rooms and with instant messaging, to access traditional media content (music, movies and television shows) and to look for information.[108] However, not all children have equal access. Again, children living in low income families are less likely to have access to information technology at home and therefore have the risk of falling behind in the development of the critical skills that they will need to participate fully in their communities.[109]

Examples – policies and programs

Boys and Girls Clubs have established **technology labs** at over 95 Boys and Girls Clubs across Canada. This Can Tech program was developed with the support of Microsoft Canada's I Can™ charitable giving program and Future Shop. It is intended to empower Boys and Girls Club members across Canada to realize their full potential, by providing them with access to the technology they need to compete in our digitally driven world.[110]

The Middle Childhood Initiative - Sources

The following documents from the Middle Childhood Initiative of the National Children's Alliance were utilized in the creation of this Policy Framework:

o **Policy Briefs** from the Middle Childhood Initiative of the National Alliance for Children and Youth:
  o *Aboriginal Children, Young People, and Families*
  o *Mental Health in Middle Childhood*
  o *Child Nutrition*
  o *Poverty and Middle Childhood*
  o *School-Aged Child Care*
  o *Inuit Children*
  o *Housing as a Social Determinant of Health*
  o *The Need for Quality Physical Education Programs in Canadian Schools*
  o *Education and Middle Childhood: Teaching for Deep Understanding*

o *Issues Affecting the Well-Being of Canadian Children in the Middle Years*
o *Recreation in Middle Childhood: An Overview*
o *Immigrant and Refugee Children and Youth in their Middle Years*
o *Middle Childhood Matters: Towards an Agenda for 6 – 12*
o *National Roundtable Proceedings: Developing a Public Policy Agenda for Children Ages 6 to 12*

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