

Children's Health and Nursing: A Summary of the Issues

What's the issue?

“The foundation for healthy growth and development in later years is established to a large degree in the first six years of life.”

– *Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians*
(Federal, Provincial and Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health, 1999)

The early years lay the foundation for life-long health, development and ability to learn. However, many children face significant challenges:

- **Poverty** – More than one million Canadian children, or nearly one child in every six, live in poverty. This rate doubles to one child in three among Aboriginal, immigrant and visible minority populations (Campaign 2000, 2004).
- **Abuse and neglect** – There has been a dramatic increase in reports of suspected abuse. Economic disadvantage is a major contributor to child neglect and appears to be a risk factor for physical abuse. Children age three and younger are most frequently investigated for neglect, and they are at greater risk of severe injury or death as a result of abuse (Hay, 1997).
- **Injuries and disease** – Injuries, such as from poisoning, fractures, burns, internal injuries, etc., are the major cause of death in childhood. Cancer in children is rare, but it represents the leading cause of disease-related death among children between the ages of one and 14 (Canadian Childhood Cancer Surveillance and Control Program, 2003).
- **Environmental contaminants** – Because of their smaller size and their developmental stage, children are more vulnerable than adults to the impacts of pollution and environmental contaminants. For example, respiratory illness (particularly asthma) is a leading cause of hospitalization for children. In addition, because children eat more than adults in proportion to their body weight, children are at greater risk of exposure to food-related toxins (Canadian Institute of Child Health, 2005)
- **Overweight and physical activity** – Over one-third of Canadian children between the ages of 2 and 11 are overweight, and of these, about half are considered obese. Three out of five children and youth between five and 17 years are not active enough for optimal growth and development. Overweight children are more likely to remain overweight or become obese in adulthood, and are at greater risk for chronic disease and mental health problems (Statistics Canada, 2005).
- **Mental illness** – Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) affects an estimated 4-5% of children. It is the most common chronic problem related to the mental health of young children (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2002)

- **Literacy** – Nearly half of Canadians have some difficulty reading and understanding materials encountered in everyday life. When children do not have the opportunity – or do not receive the support they need – to develop literacy and numeracy skills, their health can be affected significantly (Perrin, 1998).

The effects of literacy, income, poverty and health are related and interdependent in a number of ways.

Why is this issue important?

A child's health, particularly in the early years, affects all aspects of development including physical, mental, emotional, social and intellectual. Low birth weight, for example, can contribute to physical and developmental disability in children. Children who weigh more than 2,500 grams at birth have fewer health problems than those whose birth weight is less than this. Significantly, babies born to low-income parents are at increased risk for low birth weight.

Good nutrition and physical activity are vital in the early years of life. Breastfeeding gives infants a healthy start and supports bonding between mother and baby. A healthy, well-balanced diet not only builds children's young bodies but also helps to establish life-long, healthy eating habits. In addition, a healthy diet supports bone and muscle development, which are important to enjoyable participation in physical activity. Adequate, daily physical activity helps to maintain mental, social and physical health, as well as prevent disease, disability and premature death.

Low literacy has a major negative impact on health. People with low literacy are more likely to make unhealthy lifestyle choices and to engage in unhealthy behaviours. In addition, they have limited access to health information and are more likely to use medication incorrectly.

How this issue relates to the functioning of the health care system

Increasing levels of child poverty, combined with cuts to health, education and social services, have a negative impact on the health of Canada's children. These changes have resulted in increased "downstream" costs to the health care and social services system. For example, the cost of poor diets alone in Canada is estimated to be \$6.3-billion (Health Canada, 2002).

Some positive change is beginning to take place. Governments are starting to recognize the value of quality support for preschool children and their families through early learning centres, child care programs and parent resource programs. This is an important step because these programs are key to supporting healthy, well-developed children, who have strong chances for academic success, long-term health and independence. In fact, research shows that every dollar spent on child care produces at least a two dollar economic benefit through increased tax revenues, and decreased social, education and health costs.

Many jurisdictions have implemented programs that support young children and their parents. These programs are often community-based and -coordinated, focused on practical support and healthy child development, and connected to other community services like health and social services. This is

particularly true in the community health centre model. Community health nurses play important roles in supporting families by coordinating well baby programs, participating in parenting groups and providing supervision for parent support workers. One of the prime lessons learned from many of these community-based parenting programs is the need to integrate and coordinate health services and social services.

There are valuable opportunities for the health sector to organize services to more effectively meet the needs of families with young children, and to work across health disciplines and with other sectors and jurisdictions, to improve the health and well-being of young children.

Safe, accessible and appropriate child care is a priority for most families in Canada. The **National Children's Alliance**, which is a group of more than sixty national organizations committed to the well-being of children and youth in Canada, has determined six principles to guide effective child care in Canada:

- Accessible (all Canadian children should have access to programs and services of comparable quality – geographically, physically and economically)
- Portable (where you live should not be a barrier)
- Focus on quality (services and programs should be comprehensive and coordinated)
- Diverse
- Public and community-based administration and accountability
- Developmentally oriented (learning is the core)

“... we believe that a strong, Canada-wide program of early learning and care for our children is the single best investment we can make in their future and in ours.”

– The Right Honourable Prime Minister Paul Martin's Response to the Speech from the Throne,
October 6, 2004

Why is this issue important to nurses?

Nurses who work in primary care are the main point of contact between the health system and expectant mothers and families, and young children. Nurses are often in the best position to find out about the social, economic and family context of their patients. They have a long tradition of caring for families and children, as well as the experience, knowledge, and skills to positively influence the health of families and children. An understanding of the broad determinants of health combined with community development skills make nurses ideally qualified to support healthy child development in all settings.

What has CNA done to address this issue?

The *CNA Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* (2002) identifies the goal of nursing practice as a family-centred approach with clients in all settings. CNA has promoted a back-to-basics approach by nurses and policy-makers, using cost-effective community-based health promotion strategies, such as home visiting, especially for families at risk, and comprehensive school health.

CNA participates on a variety of national coalitions and committees that promote healthy child development, including:

- CNA is a partner of **Child and Family Canada**, which provides quality, credible resources on children and families.
- CNA is a member of the **National Children's Alliance**.
- CNA staff served on the **Expert Advisory Board** of the **Children's Health Team**, which reported to the **Commission for Environmental Cooperation**.
- CNA is a member of the national **Centre of Excellence for Early Child Development**, whose mandate is to foster the dissemination of scientific knowledge on the social and emotional development of young children, and the policies and services that influence this development.
- CNA staff participated in the advisory committee on the **Respecting the Air We Breathe** project of the Canadian Public Health Association.

What can nurses do about this issue?

The healthy development of children can be achieved only through the collaborative efforts of many sectors. Nurses can play a key role in this area, both through the one-on-one contact they have with families and at the community level.

At the community and policy levels, nurses can:

- Advocate for policies that have a positive impact on the health of children and their families – better access to affordable recreation, housing and nutritious food.
- Advocate for continued and increased support for existing public health programs that offer important intervention services to enhance healthy child development and support the development of parenting skills (e.g., Community Action Program for Children, Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program).
- Advocate for multi-sectoral collaboration and the integration of services within the health and social sectors.
- Support reforms of the health system that improve access to services for all children and families.
- Encourage professional education in early childhood development.

- Advocate for the creation of a universal, national child care program that incorporates the principles of the National Children's Alliance.
- Provide expertise to enhance or establish community-based activities that support children and families.

In their professional practice, nurses can:

- “Think family.” Acknowledge the individual client as a member of a family. The concept of family-centred care brings a broader, more holistic perspective to the care of children. This approach acknowledges the expertise of both the nurse and the family, and enables families to take greater control of their health.
- Support pregnant women, and those with young children, with information about nutrition, healthy living and smoking cessation.
- Support families with information on access to services, community programs and food support programs.
- Encourage and support breastfeeding. Active public health, hospital, community, and workplace support of breastfeeding will increase initiation rates and duration of breastfeeding.
- Support parents in their role with information, advice and encouragement.
- Recognize and respond to the barriers that some clients may experience in accessing health care. These barriers could be social, cultural, economic, physical or geographic.
- Ensure that information is understood, and use simpler or alternative explanations as necessary.
- Act as a resource to local schools. Given the impact of literacy on health, the health sector has a direct interest in seeing that both children and adults learn to read.

Where can you go for further information?

- CNA has several useful references on child health and the role of nurses (www.cna-aiic.ca).
- Child and Family Canada offers a virtual library of quality, credible resources on children and families (www.cfc-efc.ca).
- The Canadian Institute of Child Health (www.cich.ca) has a comprehensive range of resources on its website, including *The Health of Canada's Children* (a profile published annually), as well as provincial profiles and fact sheets on a range of topics.
- *Growing Healthy Canadians: A Guide for Positive Child Development* is a website that focuses on developmental transitions, positive outcomes, and influences and contributors to children's healthy development (www.growinghealthykids.com).
- Health Canada offers many useful resources and links on healthy child development (<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/index.html>).

Further reading

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