



Children's
Healthcare
Canada

Santé
des enfants
Canada



Pediatric Chairs of Canada
Directeurs de pédiatrie du Canada

From Vulnerable to Thriving: Investing in Healthy Futures

Before the pandemic, Canadian children and youth were waiting too long for health care. Today, the situation has only worsened. In 2020, UNICEF Report Card 16 reported that the health and well-being of children and youth in Canada ranked 30th of 38 OECD countries. Poor measures of mental and physical health were key contributors driving the low performance. We can, and must, do better.

Recognizing the transformative change required to measurably improve children's health and well-being, Children's Healthcare Canada (CHC) and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada (PCC) partnered with UNICEF Canada and CIHR Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health to design a pan-Canadian, cross-sector initiative called *Inspiring Healthy Futures*.

Through consultations with over 1,500 diverse stakeholders, we identified five interlinked action priorities which should guide research, policy, community and healthcare action to create stronger health and well-being systems for children, youth and families. *Inspiring Healthy Futures* serves as a guiding framework for the development of a comprehensive, pan-Canadian child health strategy.

Children's Healthcare Canada and Pediatric Chairs of Canada (together: "we") welcome the Government of Canada's demonstrated commitment to improving outcomes for children and youth. Affordable childcare, the Canada Child Benefit, and the Canada Dental Plan are all consequential to ameliorating conditions for children to thrive.

But health system capacity for children is at critical risk. An integrated, cross-sectoral approach is required to deliver optimal healthcare and health outcomes for children and youth. In Budget 2023, we call on the federal government to:

1. Establish an Advisory Council on the Implementation of a Pan-Canadian Child and Youth Health Strategy.
2. Prioritize children's mental health by earmarking 25% of federal investments in the Canada Mental Health Transfer for programs for children and youth.
3. Invest \$29M to advance a robust maternal, child and youth health research agenda.
4. Act immediately on Recommendation 29 of the Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare to make pediatric formulations of medicine more accessible.
5. Urgently develop a pan-Canadian HHR strategy that addresses the unique and highly specialized needs of children.

Recommendation 1: Establish an Advisory Council on the Implementation of a Pan-Canadian Child Health Strategy.

Child health and well-being have been declining in Canada for many years. Where Canada was once in the top10 of UNICEF's ranking of comparator countries regarding child health and well-being, it had fallen to 30th out of 38 OECD countries prior to the pandemic.

While many factors have contributed to Canada's decline in the UNICEF rankings, it is relevant



Children's
Healthcare
Canada

Santé
des enfants
Canada



Pediatric Chairs of Canada
Directeurs de pédiatrie du Canada

to take note of measures other jurisdictions have taken to improve their standings. Top performers such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have declared children to be a national priority and have taken action to improve children's health and well-being. To respond in a way that has a positive impact on the state of child health in Canada, the federal government must do the same: align programs and funding to a comprehensive, integrated strategy that is responsive to, and reflective of, the multidimensional lives children and youth live.

We recommend that Budget 2023 establish an Advisory Council on the Implementation of a Pan-Canadian Child Health Strategy. The Council should be tasked with leading a national conversation with diverse stakeholders to provide specific recommendations of what critical issues a strategy must address, establish metrics for success, and provide an accountability framework to ensure measurable improvements are achieved.

It is further recommended that the Council be guided by *Inspiring Healthy Futures* in approaching its work by adhering to the four themes of interdependence, equity, collaboration, and youth and family participation in responding to the five interlinked priorities (mobilized communities, impactful research and knowledge, child-friendly policies and structures, schools and communities as health and well-being hubs, and accessible health and well-being systems) as co-developed with Canadian youth.

Recommendation 2: Prioritize children's mental health by earmarking 25% of federal investments in the Canada Mental Health Transfer for programs for children and youth.

Mental health has quickly become the most pressing health challenge facing Canada's 8 million children and youth. One public study found the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms during COVID-19 has doubled compared to pre-pandemic estimates (Racine et al., 2021). In another study of 350 youth aged 10 to 18 years old, over 70% reported severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, irritability, reduced attention span, hyperactivity, or obsessions (SickKids, February 2021). This same study found that among children identifying as visible minorities, approximately 28% reported poor mental health symptoms, and 30% experienced symptoms consistent with "moderate" or "severe" generalized anxiety disorder.

Canada's children's and community hospitals have substantiated these findings with anecdotal observations of significant increases in hospitalizations relating to mental health throughout the pandemic. Further, CHC members have reported a two- to threefold increase in hospitalizations relating to acute eating disorders among children and youth. These anecdotal observations are supported by peer-reviewed research ([Holly Agostino et al, 2021](#)).

Parents have noted the rising mental health challenges affecting their children throughout the pandemic, too. In research conducted by CHC and Abacus Data (2021), 64% of parents reported a worsening of their children's mental health as a direct result of the pandemic, and 48% of parents indicated they would be seeking mental health services for their child for the first time.

Children's mental health systems are stretched to the limit, and urgent action is needed to address this decades-long crisis exacerbated by COVID-19. We call on the federal government to earmark 25% of investments under the Canada Mental Health Transfer to build capacity to deliver timely and appropriate mental health services for children and youth, close to home.



Children's
Healthcare
Canada

Santé
des enfants
Canada



Pediatric Chairs of Canada
Directeurs de pédiatrie du Canada

Additionally, we recommend the government lead the development of a child and youth-focused mental health strategy, with the following guiding principles and objectives:

- Expand access to publicly funded mental health and addiction services for children and youth, particularly those with special needs and/or medical complexity.
- Augment crisis support and ensure it is easily accessible to children, youth, and their families to avoid emergency department visits.
- Develop a long-term child and youth mental health workforce strategy to ensure timely access to appropriate mental health services close to home.
- Study the benefits of publicly funding mental health services under the Canada Health Act.

Recommendation 3: Invest \$29M to advance a robust maternal, child and youth health research agenda.

We commend the federal government for acknowledging the crucial role played by the health research community to address and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on Canadians, including children and youth. We welcome the recent investment of \$3.1M from CIHR to study impacts of COVID-19 on children. The link between a nation's economic health and the health of its citizens is well established. Health research plays an important role in our collective ability to attain good health and minimize the impact of public health threats such as COVID-19.

Canada has historically seen success contributing to children's health and disease outcomes internationally. Recently, however, Canadian researchers are ringing the alarm with respect to research and data we simply do not have access to in the Canadian context, specifically global peer-reviewed publications regarding increases in rates of childhood obesity, decreases in Vitamin D, reversals in gains relative to high school dropout rates, increases in child maltreatment and food insecurity, and increases in suicidal ideation. Without comparable data in the Canadian context, we cannot act swiftly to mitigate these serious health concerns.

Funding in the amount of \$24M for the CIHR Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health is required to advance research dedicated to children, youth and their families with a focus on the impacts of COVID-19, and beyond. This funding will enable:

- Research to underpin the delivery of policy, program and services to address health and wellness priorities defined by the Prime Minister's Youth Council including physical health, mental health, nurturing relationships with adults and mentors.
- The development and delivery of research evidence focused on addressing early years mental health (critical to social and emotional development) in the context of family, community and culture.
- A research strategy to advance measurable improvement in priorities identified in UNICEF Report Card 16 (2020), such as adolescent suicide, immunization rates, child mortality, and unhealthy weights.
- Infrastructure to support the implementation of a framework to measurably improve health and well-being outcomes of children, youth and families, generated by the pan-Canadian, cross-sector *Inspiring Healthy Futures: #WeCANforKids* initiative.



Children's
Healthcare
Canada

Santé
des enfants
Canada



Pediatric Chairs of Canada
Directeurs de pédiatrie du Canada

A further investment of \$5M is required to facilitate the Canadian Health Survey of Children and Youth (CHSCY) conducted by Statistics Canada, which generated data ideally suited to serve as a pre-pandemic baseline assessment of the health of children and youth. Conducting two follow-up rounds of collection (2022 and 2024) will provide urgently needed high-quality data to inform policy responses and resource allocations – and to assess what is and isn't working.

Recommendation 4: Act immediately on Recommendation 29 of the Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare to make pediatric formulations of medicine more accessible.

Budget 2018 announced the establishment of an Advisory Council to provide independent advice on how to implement national pharmacare in a manner that is affordable for Canadians and their families, employers and governments. The Council's mandate was to conduct a fiscal, economic and social assessment of domestic and international models relating to pharmacare.

The Council consulted with Canadians, provincial and territorial governments, Indigenous Peoples, experts, patients, the private sector, and other stakeholders to develop its final report, which called for the implementation of a universal, single-payer public pharmacare system.

The final report noted that, despite the fact that infants, children and youth represent over a quarter of the population, many drugs available for use in Canada have not been specifically approved for use by them, primarily due to a lack of research. Well-documented shortages in pediatric formulations for specialized drugs and child medication such as Tylenol and Advil have highlighted the dire state of accessibility to medicines for Canadian children and youth.

Children's Healthcare Canada and Pediatric Chairs of Canada agree with the Council's assertion that having commercial child-friendly formulations available to pediatric patients is vital. While the development of the Canadian Drug Agency is a step in the right direction to ensure accessibility to pediatric formulations over the long term, the present shortages require urgent action to make access to pediatric formulations a reality for many Canadian families.

Children's Healthcare Canada and Pediatric Chairs of Canada call on the federal government to take immediate action toward the development of a pediatric national formulary to provide an immediate response to the specific needs of children and youth in the midst of an urgent shortage of pediatric drugs.

Recommendation 5: Urgently develop a pan-Canadian HHR strategy that addresses the unique and highly specialized needs of children.

As children's health systems face extraordinary demand for services, we are struggling to recruit and retain a skilled workforce. Children are not tiny adults – children's health care providers are amongst Canada's most highly specialized.

We recommend the urgent development of a health human resources strategy that includes a focus on the unique skills and experience required to deliver healthcare services to children and youth. This strategy must address current labour gaps in the healthcare sector but also 'look forward' to foster the resilience and sustainability of our workforce.



Children's
Healthcare
Canada

Santé
des enfants
Canada



Pediatric Chairs of Canada
Directeurs de pédiatrie du Canada

Canada stands at a critical juncture. We need to both address the crisis today facing children and youth and the health systems that serve them, and also plan for our future. We have the expertise, knowledge and tools to restore our global standing on children's health. Now, all we need is bold leadership and a commitment from the federal government to make this possible.

About Us: Children's Healthcare Canada is a national association serving healthcare delivery organizations that care for children and youth. Membership includes all 16 children's hospitals in Canada, community hospitals, children's treatment centres, regional health authorities, palliative care, respite, and home care agencies.

The Pediatric Chairs of Canada represents the Department Heads of Pediatrics within Canada's 17 medical schools.