

CALL TO ACTION BRIEF

THE OPPORTUNITY OF NATURAL SUPPORTS TO PROMOTE WELL-BEING AND RESILIENCY IN ALBERTA

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FUNDED BY

Max Bell Foundation, and Burns Memorial Fund
Policy Fellowship 2017-2020, Alberta, Canada

December 2019

CALL TO ACTION

The Opportunity of Natural Supports to Promote Well-being and Resiliency in Alberta



Investing in strategies that promote healthy environments and positive experiences through childhood and adolescence enables optimal development, facilitating a skilled and civil society.

This Call to Action reflects contemporary evidence about the value of investments at the community level to mitigate the influence of adversity on child and youth development. It is aligned with Government of Alberta and Not for Profit sector documents, including the Well-being and Resiliency Frameworks (March 2019).¹

This Call to Action is designed for those who are seeking information about Natural Supports, including material to inform strategic planning and evaluation. The Call to Action provides information about the potential of **natural supports and supportive environments** to foster child and youth development and to mitigate the influence of adversity on individual potential.

FRAMING THE CALL

Natural Supports are informal reciprocal relationships and associations that are sustained over a period of time. These relationships are built on trust, dependability, kindness and mutual respect, and involve some form of give-and-take. In other words, they are healthy supportive relationships.

Western society values the concept of maximizing individual potential and numerous theorists have described how this can be achieved.^{i 2,3} Well-being is more likely when children and youth are safe, are physically and emotionally supported, experience connection to community and culture and have opportunities to develop their potential. Stress and adversity are experienced by all children and appropriate stress can assist with the development of resiliency. However, excessive family chaos or dysfunction increases the likelihood that children fail, engage in deviant behavior, leave school and misuse substances. Among vulnerable children and families, **natural supports and naturally supportive environments** can buffer the influence of adversity to reduce the likelihood of poor outcomes. **Natural supports** enable children and families to experience safety, security and belonging. Natural Supports are informal reciprocal relationships and associations that are sustained over a period of time. They consist of close relationships, such as family and friends, and also include broader associations, such as neighbours and mentors. Of particular relevance to this work are Natural Supports in the context of community which would include local businesses, associations and resources. These supports include the people we work with, sports teams we play on, book clubs or drop in events, and people we regularly see such as coffee baristas, hair dressers, bus drivers, and others.

ⁱⁱ Child Well Being as defined in the Alberta Well Being and Resiliency Framework March 2019, and aligned with other theorists including Maslow, Erikson, Piaget, Bronfenbrenner, Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, and the Centre for Disease Control ACE's Pyramid, etc. (outcome) when the natural support has the skills (person), is in a safe and supportive environment (place) and the activity is relevant, barrier free/align

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

For the purpose of understanding **natural supports**, there is an opportunity to link evidence from best practices and programs that have been shown to support individual development and configure these into community-based approaches. Of note, one of the challenges of measuring outcomes of successful natural supportive environments, including the remediation of the effects of adversity on development is that ‘nothing happens’. When children and youth are cared for and safe, prepared for school and competent to engage in relationships.... nothing happens. They accomplish school work, make friends, enjoy hobbies, solve problems and are virtually invisible. They don’t appear in the Principal’s office, the Psychiatrist’s office or in a Young Offenders program. They are uncounted. An analogy could be made to immunization - when rates of immunization are high, there are no epidemics or outbreaks - nothing happensⁱⁱ. Consequently, those interested in evaluating the influence of strategies designed to enhance natural supports will need to measure both process and other outcomes potentially associated with global indicators of well-being (see below for examples) recognizing that measurement of a causal association is problematic.ⁱⁱⁱ

CONTEXTUALIZING THE WORK

Strategies are most likely to be successful when they reflect contemporary issues concerning children, youth and families. The current environment includes important barriers that must be addressed if naturally supportive environments are to be created and sustained (see evidence section for more details). In brief, many community organizations do not hold a vision for addressing the needs of children and youth, and action often focuses on facility rental or infrastructure. Many of those who could be influential positive natural supports are unaware of the need, and of their value. For example, the small business owner may be unaware that his actions towards youth can have important influence. Many families struggle to meet financial and other obligations and note that ‘time crunch’ limits ability to participate. Youth and children who may most benefit from the development of natural supports are often already vulnerable and may have fewer skills to engage- including poor self- regulation, anxiety and depression, and/or behaviour problems.

Consideration of the following may improve the likelihood that investments in activities to enhance natural supports are successful.^v

PERSON

FAMILY

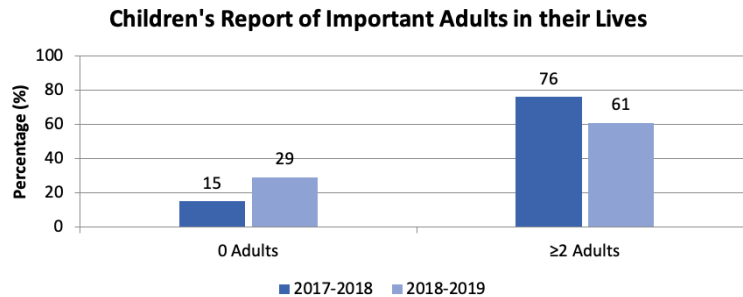
1. 65% of families have both parents in the work force by the time children are 3 years of age.⁴
2. 24% of men and 38% of women in dual-income families report severe ‘time-crunch’ stress.^{4,5}
3. Technology is distracting: 62% of parents in Alberta feel negatively distracted by technology (Growing up Digital) and 76% of those same parents, feel as though their technology habits influence those of their children.

ⁱⁱ Consequently, program evaluation needs to accommodate measures of engagement, long term program success, measures of well-being, neighbourhood affiliation and outcomes that may be non-traditional. Duration and participation measures may be required to accompany specific outcome measures.

ⁱⁱⁱ Those interested in program evaluation measures may want to refer to the Middle Years Development Instrument, UNICEF, and other reports on children and youth.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH

1. When asked, “who are you with after school”, 24% of children in Grade 4 said “by myself”, while only 9% said with a “non-parent adult”.⁶
2. The percent of children reporting that they had two or more important adults in their lives decreased from 76% to 61%, while the percent reporting no important adults increased from 15% to 29% in Grade 4 from 2017-2018 to 2018-2019.⁶



PLACE

1. Population diversity (30%) results in cultural and religious diversity, heterogeneous values and diversity of viewpoints.⁷
2. Interviews with community leaders revealed that the majority do not see attending to the needs of children and youth as the mandate compared to competing demands to generate revenue through facility rental.
3. Local and global stresses related to globalization and political/economic instability have created an elevated sense of stress and diminished optimism.⁸

TIME

1. Although 88% of Canadians are satisfied with their personal safety from crime, and the majority perceive their neighbourhood as safe, other evidence suggests that we perceive our environment as less safe than in the past.⁹⁻¹¹ 57% of neighbourhood champions interviewed (n=13 of 23) discussed the importance of having safe spaces for families and residents, especially for children and youth, and those who are vulnerable.^{iv}
2. Caring for others has become commodified and professionalized over the past decades.¹² For example, we have grief counsellors, paid ‘friendly visitors’ for the aging, and professional child care, paid birthday party entertainment etc. This trend may influence confidence in our ability to provide support, particularly in areas which have become commodified/professionalized.
3. Public Sector Scope: Public sector investments in health, education, social programs have improved wellness, and have also deferred responsibility away from individual citizens and communities towards government.¹³ In the natural support arena, this is particularly relevant because communities may be unclear of their role in providing social support for vulnerable families.

^{iv} Please refer to Evidence piece titled “Connections First: Community perceptions of social connections and supports to mitigate the impact of adversity for children and youth” for more information.

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT SAFE AND HEALTHY CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THROUGH NATURAL SUPPORTS

Natural Supports are informal reciprocal connections that consist of close relationships, such as family and friends, and broader associations, such as neighbours and mentors.¹

Natural supports elevate the well-being of another through reciprocal relationship, which may include skill development, shared problem solving and support. The contemporary opportunity is to increase/expand the environments that would facilitate the development of natural supports, particularly for youth and children. Well known programmatic approaches include mentoring, Guides, Scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters, arts and recreation. In the former examples the relationship between the 'adult' and the 'child or youth' is formalized and structured. The current opportunity is to determine how natural supports, and naturally supportive environments can be developed in communities in novel, informal, less programmatic approach. This upstream primary prevention approach would be inclusive, and potentially engage those most vulnerable, but least likely to participate in structured programs.

Evidence suggests the following be considered:^v

1. SAFETY

- a. Strategies to share information about neighbourhood safety are required.

2. ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS ¹⁴

- a. The scope of practice for members of Community Association boards must include engagement. Evidence suggests that many associations are primarily focused on facility rental/revenue and maintenance.
- b. Community leaders/organizations should prioritize and expand their role in facilitating the development of naturally supportive relationships through access to space, equipment, etc. These efforts could be quantifiable in a program evaluation. The role of the 'friendly community' could be prioritized over 'profit' or 'maintenance'.

3. FORMALIZE CO-ORDINATION

- a. Community leaders who are responsible for outreach and the development of strategies that enhance natural supports should be compensated. Volunteers recruited through strategies should be recognized.
- b. The level of volunteer vs. professional leadership should be evaluated according the skills required for the task. For example, volunteers are competent in general activities such as community dinners/entertainment. More skilled leadership may be required for other activities.
- c. Strategies to increase participation need to address barriers including cost, location, time, relevance and perceived value.

4. SPECIFIC STRATEGY CONSIDERATIONS

- a. Develop a shared vision - what can people come together around.
- b. Duration of effort - evidence suggests community programs of 6 to 9 months are optimal for skill development and building relationships.
- c. Consider a broad range of partners - small business, school, police, recreation, seniors, organizations, cultural experts, etc.

5. INTERGENERATIONAL ACTIVITIES

- a. There is an opportunity to pilot intergenerational activities, particularly the engagement of seniors with children and youth.

^v See Evidence section for more details.

6. AUDIENCE SPECIFIC APPROACHES

- a. Evidence suggests that both audience specific and general approaches are warranted. Specific groups, including LGBTQ2+, Newcomers, Refugees, Immigrants, Vulnerable Families may require more targeted, longer duration approaches.
- b. Consider some specific emphasis on vulnerable groups. Natural supports can especially impact the lives of those children, youth, and families who have experienced adversity and trauma such as abuse, neglect and household dysfunction.¹⁵ Supportive, reciprocal relationships can improve well-being for children and youth.

7. SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

- a. Social media may be a vehicle to communicate about activities, and to recruit volunteers.

8. DESCRIBED ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

- a. Identify natural support champions who may be unaware of their influence, such as bus drivers, mail carriers, dog walkers and local businesses and create opportunities for engagement.

9. DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUTION

- a. Consider metrics for evaluation such as components of the Middle Years Development Instrument.⁶

SUMMARY

Strategic investments to enhance natural supports in community settings can mitigate the influence of adversity on children, youth and families.

Low cost preventive approaches that include natural supports and are implemented at a community level have a positive return on investment because they reduce the likelihood children and youth experience problems associated with exposure to adversity.

Successful community approaches require investment in leadership and co-ordination to leverage contributions by volunteers and local businesses. Strategic plans that include opportunities for skill development, including art, recreation, and leadership can enhance competency in vulnerable children and youth and create equity. Community specific intergenerational, cross-cultural, as well as cultural and population specific approaches can enhance child and youth competency, contributing to the development of a civic society.

“ The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies of which they were born.”²⁸

Suggested reference: Tough S, Reynolds N, Walsh JL, Agius M. Call to Action: The Opportunity of Natural Supports to Promote Well-being and Resiliency in Alberta. Document of the Connections First Max Bell Foundation and Burns Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship, December, 2019. Available at the [All Our Families](#), [Max Bell Foundation](#), and [Connections First](#) websites.

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