

Max Bell Foundation & Burns
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CONNECTIONS FIRST EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

This Executive Summary reflects contemporary evidence about the value of investments at the community level to mitigate the influence of adversity on children age 6-16. It is aligned with Government of Alberta and Not for Profit sector documents, including the Well-Being and Resiliency Framework (March 2019).¹⁻³

Society strives to maximize child and youth well-being which includes sense of safety, physical and emotional well-being, sense of purpose and belonging, and skill acquisition.^{i 4,5} Today we have the opportunity to reflect on how we can best help 13 year old Laura:

*Laura has enough food to eat and a home, **she is one of the 25% of youth who feel hopeless and sad, and one of the 30% who report no important adult in their life.** Laura feels sad and although she has a few friends, no one is her 'best friend'. She is finding reading difficult so she is uncomfortable at school. She likes to draw and dance, but she can't stay for any after school activities because she needs to get home to babysit her younger siblings. She is finding it hard to get excited about the future.... And she spends more and more time alone every day.*

Or how about 10 year old Albert:

*Albert has lived in the same home for 5 years with his parents, both of whom work hard to make ends meet. **Albert is one of the 40% who do not receive adequate support from family, friends or school; and one of the 24% who are alone after school.** Albert is moderately successful at school. He is quiet by nature and finds it difficult to participate in group activities and he is lonely. He tried out for the gymnastics team, but didn't make it. He thought about joining the local Scout group, but he can't get transportation. He has no hobbies. He is finding it hard to get excited about the future.... And he spends more and more time alone every day.*

Laura and Albert are at risk of academic and social failure, and mental and physical health problems. They need support to reach their potential. Natural Supports and naturally supportive environments can help children and youth develop resiliency, build skills, and buffer the influence of adversity. Natural Supports are informal reciprocal connections that consist of close relationships, such as family and friends, and broader associations, such as neighbours and mentors.⁶ Natural Supports facilitate well-being and belonging. Of particular relevance to this work are Natural Supports in the context of community which includes local businesses, associations and resources. These are the people we work with, sports teams we play on, book clubs or drop in events where we feel welcomed. These are people we regularly see such as neighbors, coffee baristas, and hair dressers. The idea of natural supports is reflected in the invitation offered by Mr. Rogers; 'Won't you be my neighbor'. The invitation to greet one another and be kind.ⁱⁱ

Intentional incorporation of strategies into community planning to increase positive exposure to natural supports will improve child, youth and family well-being and facilitate coping with difficulty. The following indicators are examples of how communities can assess their alignment with creating natural supports and naturally supportive environments.

ⁱ 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. Well-being and problem solving as guiding philosophy promoted by Mr. Rogers' A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood television show.

ⁱⁱ Oxytocin, a human hormone related to trust and empathy, is secreted in response to positive human interactions - including brief informal events. For more information: Sandstrom GM, Dunn EW. Social Interactions and Well-Being; Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 2014 40(7) 910-922. Zak PJ et al. Oxytocin is associated with human trustworthiness Hormones and Behaviour 2005; 48:522-527

1. Community organizations identify engagement, partnership and inclusion as a key objective.
 2. Local businesses are engaged in strategies that promote belonging and connectedness, and in activities that support children age 6 to 16.
 3. Approaches to engaging community members in ‘building supportive community’, and in connecting with those who are vulnerable can be identified.
 4. Allocation of useable space to encourage informal connections, including in out-of-school time, can be identified.
 5. Activities are low cost, accessible and reflect community member diversity and interests.
 6. Funded community coordinators who are resourced to develop supportive approaches.
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Community organizations, business leaders and citizens are encouraged to come together to develop local approaches to improving natural supports. The following details can be used to contextualize the local conversation.

PARENTS

1. 65% of families have both parents in the work force by the time children are 3 years of age.⁷
2. 24% of men and 38% of women in dual-income families report severe ‘time-crunch’ stress.^{7,8}
3. Technology is distracting: 62% of parents in Alberta feel negatively distracted by technology and 76% of those same parents feel as though their technology habits influence those of their children.⁹

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”.¹⁰
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 2018-2019.¹⁰

PLACE

1. 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 due to a lack of resources, including volunteers, staff, and funding.
2. Local and global stresses related to globalization and political/economic instability have created an elevated sense of stress, fear of job insecurity, and diminished optimism.¹¹

TIME

1. Canadians perceive our environment as less safe for our children compared to the past.¹²⁻¹⁴ 57% of neighbourhood champions interviewed (n=13 of 23) articulated the need for safe spaces for families and residents, especially for children and youth, and those who are vulnerable.

ⁱⁱⁱ 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.

2. Caring for others has become commodified and professionalized over the past decades.¹⁵ 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 deferred responsibility away from individual citizens and communities towards government.¹⁶ In the natural support arena, this is particularly relevant because communities may be unclear of their role in providing social support for vulnerable families.

SUMMARY

Now...back to Laura and Albert:

*Laura is **one of the youths who live in a neighborhood with a natural supports strategy.** She learns at school that the community centre is open at the end of the day, and she can bring her siblings. Her parents agree she can try it. The school organizes a group to walk over after school and joins in. On arrival she notices there are snacks and a reading space as well as community members who help you find a book and read together. Her younger siblings can engage in free play in the gym. She doesn't feel very confident at first but her siblings seem to be having fun. Over time she begins to make friends with her reading buddy and even talks to some of her school mates on the walk over. Slowly, she appreciates the new knowledge and skills she gains as her reading improves, and the different perspectives she gains from her reading buddy. Laura finds herself volunteering at a community event ... And she spends more and more time planning for her future every day.*

Or how about 10-year-old Albert:

*Albert is **one of the youths who live in a neighborhood with a natural supports strategy.** Albert's neighbor Jeff attends a community meeting and learns about the importance of connecting. Jeff notices that Albert is interested in their dog and suggests to Albert's parents that he may like to join him on a walk to the dog park. Albert is hesitant at first, but with some encouragement agrees. Albert enjoys watching the dogs play at the park, and over time begins to chat with his neighbor about what he is learning in school. Through this, Jeff asks Albert if he will help his niece with a science project. Albert feels proud that Jeff believes in his science skills, and in helping Jeff's niece, Albert makes a new friend... And he spends more and more time talking to Jeff about jobs that blend his interest in dogs, science and math.*

Strategic investments to enhance natural supports in community settings can mitigate the influence of adversity on children in the middle years and their families. Activities that encourage engagement with others, reciprocity, inclusion and skill development can enhance well-being and belongingness - outcomes of naturally supportive experiences. **Activities implemented at a community level have a positive return on investment because they mitigate the influence of adversity on development for children in the middle years.**

“ **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.** ”¹⁷

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