

CONNECTIONS FIRST

NATURAL SUPPORTS EVIDENCE OVERVIEW

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PURPOSE To identify policy opportunities to enhance natural supports within the community for potentially vulnerable Albertan children 6-16 years of age and their families to optimize positive lifelong development.

RATIONALE There are a lack of supports that specifically target children 6-16 years of age. Middle childhood is an important period of cognitive, social and physical development, including the development of life skills associated with long term success. It is a critical time for children to begin to cultivate more active roles within their community.

OUTPUT There were 6 evidence pieces completed for this Policy Fellowship which informed a Call to Action. There were 2 additional projects that had natural supports as a core component that also informed this Fellowship.

CONCLUSION Evidence, including brain science, indicates that natural supports and naturally supportive environments can improve outcomes for vulnerable children, youth and families. Contemporary data reveals citizen interest in local activities but barriers in regard to time, awareness, relevance and access. Numerous communities did not identify support for children and families as a priority over activities focused on fiscal management of resources. Facilitators and barriers to naturally supportive community-based approaches were identified, many of which can be addressed through strategy and planning. Evidence and stakeholder feedback indicate support for policy and practice recommendations, the development of indicators to assess natural supports.

Key considerations for each target population (residents and families, community, business, service organization, and public policy) are provided in the What this means section of each evidence piece.

EVIDENCE SUMMARY

1. Connections First: A rapid review of understanding the role of natural supports in advancing life skills for children and youth

- *Purpose:* To identify characteristics of effective community-based natural support interventions and initiatives that work to develop life skills in children and youth between 6 and 16 years of age, and then validate these findings within an Alberta context with City of Calgary Community Social Workers (CSWs).
- *Methods:* A rapid review of peer-reviewed quantitative and mixed method literature was conducted. Life skills and outcomes of interest were development of self-esteem, self-efficacy, leadership skills, healthy coping, effective conflict management, and resilience. 25 initiatives were included. 5 CSWs from highly vulnerable communities validated these findings within a Calgary context.
- *Key Findings:* The review found 4 key characteristics of community-based initiatives that effectively promoted natural support and life skill development in children and youth; they were those initiatives that were multifaceted (multiple components), targeted a specific population, run by trained personnel and leadership, and had a duration between 9 weeks and 6 months. Validation with CSWs generally supported these findings, but mentioned the need to consider opportunities for everyone to promote a more inclusive environment; also, having volunteer and resident led opportunities in addition to opportunities led by paid and trained personnel may enable easier connections through familiarity and pre-established trust. This also promotes community capacity building.
- *What this means as a:*
 - *Resident or family:* Community-based initiatives and interventions for children and youth that enable the creation of natural supports opportunities can also build life skills. Consider approaches that include evidence-based characteristics. CSW expert input suggest approaches that are available for everyone, and are resident or volunteer-led.
 - *Community:* Consider partnering with local service clubs or business organizations, and build capacity of citizens to add approaches that build natural supports and life skills for children and youth.
 - *Business:* Support and invest in local community-based initiatives and interventions with effective characteristics of life skill development for children and youth.
 - *Service organization:* Consider the characteristics of successful approaches to life skill development during community implementation. Provide opportunities for citizens to be informed of the value of life skill development, and their role in leadership and engagement, with the objective of enhanced community development.
 - *Public Policy:* Provide adequate guidelines to ensure characteristics of success are embedded in approaches to build life skills and/or develop natural supports for children and youth.

2. Connections First: Policy and program recommendations for community-based programs to improve life skills for children and youth

- *Purpose:* To examine if the evidence gathered by the rapid review on interventions and initiatives that work to develop life skills in children and youth align with the strategic directions put forward by Government of Alberta Family and Community Support Services Provincial Priorities.¹
- *Methods:* Each of the 25 interventions and findings from the rapid review were mapped onto the FCSS Provincial Priorities¹ to identify alignment and gaps within peer-reviewed literature regarding community-based natural support opportunities.
- *Key Findings:* High quality evidence exists on strategies that improve individual well-being. There is limited evidence on strategies that address well-being of families and communities, and it is of lower quality.
- *What this means as a:*
 - *Resident or family:* Opportunities that enable citizens to become aware of the value of engagement with children and youth are warranted. This includes improved knowledge of the impact of adversity and stress on development, and the benefits of natural supports.
 - *Community:* Implement approaches that address the well-being of families and communities. Ensure strategies exist for high-quality implementation and evaluation.
 - *Business:* Assist communities with being accountable for reporting on implementation and evaluation of strategies that address the well-being of families and communities.
 - *Service organization:* Report on outcomes of community-based approaches, including in peer-reviewed literature, to create more evidence. Focus strategies to improve the well-being of families and communities.
 - *Resident or family:* Provide recommendations for organizations and communities to report on implementation and evaluation of strategies that address the well-being of families and communities.
 - *Public Policy:* Provide recommendations for organizations and communities to report on implementation and evaluation of strategies that address the well-being of families and communities.

3. Connections First: Family perceptions of natural supports in Albertan communities

- *Purpose:* To identify how natural support opportunities are currently being utilized in Albertan neighbourhoods, and the prevalence of barriers or enablers to accessing these opportunities.
- *Methods:* 316 Albertan families completed an online survey, 73.6% of which had at least one child between 0 and 17 years of age. Questions included an adapted Neighbourhood Cohesion Instrument,² a listing of formal and informal community-based opportunities and activities that can enable the creation of natural supports, family enablers and barriers influencing participation in community-based natural supports opportunities, and demographics.
- *Key Findings:* 71.5% of Albertan families use 2 or more natural supports opportunities within their

home neighbourhood (formal and informal). Families were more likely to participate in informal than formal opportunities. 78.5% of families feel connected to their home neighbourhood, and there was a positive correlation between families who feel connected to their neighbourhood, and participated in any number of natural supports opportunities. Families experiencing more barriers (i.e.: lack of time, lack of opportunities) felt less connected to their neighbourhood. 61.4% of families experience 2 or more barriers to participating in neighbourhood natural support opportunities.

- *What this means as a:*

- *Resident or family:* Participation in one or more community-based natural support opportunity, informal or formal, increases connectivity and sense of neighborhood belonging.
- *Community:* Reduce barriers to enable family and resident participation in opportunities to increase neighbourhood cohesiveness. Identify the key barriers to participation by connecting directly with residents and families.
- *Business:* Work with communities and local organizations to identify and mitigate key barriers, including bylaws and legalities, to increase opportunities for residents and families to connect.
- *Service organization:* Offer opportunities that enable the creation of natural supports to increase neighbourhood cohesiveness and connectedness. Emphasize informal opportunities, such as interest groups, neighbourhood event nights, and block parties.
- *Public Policy:* Work locally to decrease barriers to participation to increase neighbourhood cohesion. Change policy to facilitate access and participation, including legal and risk management barriers.

4. Connections First: Community newsletter and website analysis of the availability of natural support opportunities in Albertan neighbourhoods

- *Purpose:* To determine the prevalence and availability of community-based natural support opportunities advertised within community websites and newsletters in Calgary and Edmonton.
- *Methods:* Available community newsletters and webpages were reviewed from every community in Calgary and Edmonton for May 2019. Results were compared between webpages and newsletters, and community vulnerability classification from the Indices of Community Well-being report from the City of Calgary³ and the 2016 Census Report from the City of Edmonton.⁴
- *Key Findings:*
 - *Website:* More informal opportunities were advertised on community websites than formal opportunities. In Edmonton, highly vulnerable communities were more likely to have informal opportunities, and less likely to have formal opportunities advertised on community websites in comparison to moderately and least vulnerable communities. In Calgary, highly vulnerable communities were found to have significantly less informal and formal opportunities advertised on community websites.
 - *Newsletter:* Highly vulnerable communities had less formal and informal natural support opportunities advertised in community newsletters compared to less vulnerable communities.
 - *Website vs newsletter:* Newsletters included more information on both informal and

formal opportunities compared to websites regardless of community vulnerability.

- *What this means as a:*
 - *Resident or family:* Reading the local newsletter and/or website is an ideal place to learn about activities. Reach out to community leadership, and Community Association and League representatives to advertise and share information about informal and formal events.
 - *Community:* Invest in websites and newsletters to ensure they are current, user friendly, and advertise events that promote engagement and relationship development.
 - *Business:* Assist communities with development of skills to enable user friendly and updated community websites and newsletters.
 - *Service organization:* Target vulnerable communities when advertising events, and use both newsletters and websites.
 - *Public Policy:* Work locally to decrease barriers to participation to increase neighbourhood cohesion. Change policy to facilitate access and participation, including legal and risk management barriers.

5.

Connections First: An environmental scan of perceptions and practices of community based natural supports.

- *Purpose:* To complete an environmental scan of City of Calgary Community Social Workers (CSWs) perceptions and practices of programs and opportunities that enable the development of natural supports within Calgary communities, especially those considered highly vulnerable.
- *Methods:* CSWs were interviewed as key front-line representatives that work to promote individual, family and community well-being by designing, implementing and evaluating community programs. 7 CSWs representing 10 communities in Calgary, all classified as highly vulnerable,³ participated.
- *Key Findings:* Personal financial stressors and low income; busy schedules; and lack of value identified in community connections were the key barriers to participation in community events. The key facilitators for participation in community events included free food; free events and activities open to everyone; and engaging with community champions (residents with leadership roles).
- *What this means as a:*
 - *Resident or family:* Commit to participating in a free community event, and consider participating as a volunteer. Learn about the value of engagement and help your family or neighbour engage.
 - *Community:* Consider the key facilitators and barriers when implementing community-based opportunities to ensure high levels of participation of residents and families.
 - *Business:* Work with communities and local organizations to identify and mitigate key barriers, including bylaws and legalities, to increase opportunities for residents and families to connect.
 - *Service organization:* Help address the facilitators and barriers by volunteering and supporting local community events to ensure high levels of participation. Role model networking and connecting through participation.

- *Public Policy:* Shift thinking to address the barriers for community-based opportunities to enable participation and improve community resilience and cohesion.

6. Connections First: Community perceptions of social connections

- *Purpose:* To understand community champion perceptions of facilitators and barriers to strategies that advance natural supports within Calgary communities.
- *Methods:* Community champions, including Community Association representatives, volunteers, residents and Community Social Workers were interviewed. 23 champions were included, 12 from highly vulnerable communities, 7 moderately vulnerable and 4 least vulnerable.³ Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed.
- *Key Findings:*
 - Busy schedules, lack of awareness, and limited resources were the most frequently reported barriers families in Calgary experience preventing participation in community strategies; these were especially prevalent within populations that can be difficult to connect with, such as youth, seniors, newcomers and families in crisis. Key facilitators were free and low-cost opportunities and equipment; engaging residents to enable opportunities for input; and partnerships with local schools.
 - Re-occurring themes were in reference to safety; the need for a specific, ideally hired, representative to engage community members and families; discussion around the role of Community Associations; barriers associated with volunteering and access to space; and promotion of intergenerational opportunities and connections.
- *What this means as a:*
 - *Resident or family:* To create more naturally supportive communities, engage with your community; this can include attending community events, volunteering, or connecting with an engagement coordinator.
 - *Community:* Consider key facilitators and barriers during implementation of community-based strategies and events to enable increased participation by residents and families. A designated community connector or coordinator will promote community relationships, and will build community capacity.
 - *Business:* Partner or collaborate with other businesses, organizations, Community Associations or Leagues, or schools to combine resources and promote more community-based approaches and events for families and residents.
 - *Service organization:* Partnerships with Community Associations, Community Leagues, and other community hubs can be facilitated through supporting the development of a community engagement coordinator. Build a community's capacity by addressing key barriers.
 - *Public Policy:* Build a community's capacity to overcome key barriers. This includes supporting community connectors, engagement coordinators, and other community champions.

ADDITIONAL PROJECTS ALIGNED WITH NATURAL SUPPORTS

1. Mobilizing the knowledge of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) prevention and proactive supports for Alberta's children, youth, and families: An environmental scan

- *Purpose:* To gain a better understanding of work currently being done in Alberta regarding preventing and addressing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and building resiliency in children, youth, and families.
- *Methods:* An environmental scan was conducted to identify the current activity, status, and evidence-base of ACEs prevention and practice support initiatives in Alberta. Interviews were conducted with 52 initiatives across Alberta, and 7 initiatives from BC, the USA and the UK. Key evidence was synthesized. Findings were aligned with key recommendations derived from the core principles and best practices from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child.^{5,6} Of these recommendations, 2 are related to natural supports and relationships: “support responsive relationships”, and “promote natural supports”.
- *Key Findings:* The top 3 Harvard key recommendations identified across all initiatives were “support responsive relationships”, “prevent and reduce sources of significant stress”, and “strengthen life skills”. Across catchment and population, there is a common purpose to address ACEs and/or build resilience; it's the packaging that varies. There is a lack of evidence with respect to whether routine ACE screening is warranted. An ACE assessment or ACE/trauma-informed approach needs to incorporate the science on resilience to identify appropriate interventions for well-being. Programs need to be adapted and relevant to the culture and context of the clients they serve and support.
- *What this means as a:*
 - *Resident or family:* Reach out to community leadership and local organizations to ensure approaches are culturally sensitive and meet the needs of those living within the community, including those who are potentially vulnerable..
 - *Community:* Community leadership and champions need to be culturally sensitive, and incorporate ACE or trauma-informed approaches with considerations for building resilience. Input from residents and families can assist in ensuring the needs of citizens are met.
 - *Business:* Incorporate resilience and trauma-informed approaches through training employees and partners.
 - *Service organization:* Incorporate resilience when assessing for ACEs, or use of an ACE or trauma-informed approach in programs and interventions. Natural supports are one mechanism to building resilience in children and youth.
 - *Public Policy:* There is a need to recognize the importance of universal messaging around ACEs and a commitment to incorporating brain science and resilience science in decision-making. Further integration of efforts is needed.

2. Out-of-School Time: Evidence synthesis, best practices and environmental scan

- *Purpose:* To appraise and synthesize contemporary evidence from diverse sources related to best practices for quality out-of-school time (OST) approaches.

- *Methods:* Evidence appraisal and synthesis identified best practices in OST approaches serving children and youth aged 6-12 years. These best practices were aligned with gold standard OST frameworks, as well as the ACEs and Natural Supports literature to highlight innovative practices, determine gaps, and recommend next steps. Finally, an environmental scan was conducted to provide a snapshot of current OST approaches in Alberta to provide local data and context.
- *Key Findings:* Following quality appraisal of the evidence sources, key themes to organize best practices emerged: partnerships, access and participation, inclusion, evaluation, leadership characteristics, and approach characteristics. Several innovative and emerging best practices were found – they were generally related to 2 main topics: considerations for specific sub-populations, culture, genders and identities; and the second was regarding evaluation, quality improvement, and knowledge mobilization. The opportunities identified in this project mostly related to the theme communities and youth working together, including service-learning and promotion of natural supports. There are opportunities to explore in future OST approaches and planning to enhance current practice.
- *What this means as a:*
 - *Resident or family:* Encourage OST programs to allow for drop-in or ad hoc participation. Learn about the value of life skill development for your children and youth, and encourage them to participate. Ask about opportunities to contribute in areas of your interest, such as culture, language or art. Ask for strategies that enable engagement.
 - *Community:* Explore more innovative OST approaches that incorporate service-learning, and promotion of natural supports. OST approaches and systems have been identified as an opportunity to assist communities in creating naturally supportive environments for their children and youth. There is a need to expand OST approaches to include weekends, professional development days and holidays.
 - *Business:* Collaborate with communities and organizations to enable implementation and evaluation of innovative practices for OST approaches.
 - *Service organization:* Incorporation of innovative and emerging best practices, including service-learning and promotion of natural supports, within community-based OST approaches will enable communities to better support their children and youth. Building capacity in community leadership and volunteers will provide a better understanding of innovative OST approaches, and will also enable multiple levels of evaluation.
 - *Public Policy:* Allocation of adequate supports will enable implementation and evaluation of innovative practices for OST approaches enabling communities and organizations to better support their children and youth.

These evidence pieces and projects have informed all Policy Fellowship products. The Call to Action specifically references key learnings from this evidence.⁷

CONTEXTUAL “QUICK FACTS”:

Children and Youth

1. 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 2018-2019.⁸
2. 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”.⁸
3. The percent of children thriving on the Well-being Index decreased from 42% to 38% in Grade 4 from 2017-2018 to 2018-2019.⁸
4. 57.3% of children receive adequate support from their families, 65.9% from their friends, but only 42.9% say they receive enough support at school.⁹
5. Canada’s ranking in an average of three measures of child relationships (classmates, mothers and fathers) is very low, 25th from 28 developed countries.¹⁰
6. Only 20.8% of children between the ages of 5 and 11 years play for at least 1.5 hours each day.⁹
7. Only 9.5% of children and youth (5-17 years of age) meet the moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, screen time and sleep recommendations from the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Behaviour Guidelines for Children and Youth. 10.6% of children and youth between 5 and 17 years of age are obese.⁹
8. 27.4% of children have felt sad or hopeless for a long period of time.⁹
9. 24.5% of youth between the ages of 11 and 15 feel lonely; this is higher among girls (29.7%).⁹
10. 34.2% of children between 11 and 15 years of age experience weekly mental distress evident from symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, and trouble sleeping.⁹
11. 10.5% of youth between 12 and 17 years of age have reported being diagnosed with a mood or anxiety disorder.⁹
12. 96.2% of children and youth have someone they can talk to when experiencing difficulties.⁹
13. Between the pre-teen years and late adolescence, the percentage of boys who are happy drops from 87% to 63%, in comparison to girls which drops from 93% to 69%.¹¹
14. 4% of girls worry about the future at age 10; this increases to as high as 33% at 18 to 21 years. For boys, 7% worry about the future at age 10; this increases to 22% at 18 to 21 years.¹¹
15. 9.8% of youth between the ages of 15 and 17 have seriously contemplated or considered suicide.¹²
16. 16.5% of adolescents feel high levels of time pressure.¹⁰ Girls are more likely to report extreme time pressure (26.3%) compared to boys (8.3%).¹³
17. 35.2% of youth have experienced discrimination.⁹
18. Approximately 20% of youth have experienced cyberbullying and/or cyberstalking.¹⁴

Families

1. 66.2% of parents are satisfied with their life.¹⁵ However, only 55% of children and youth report a high level of satisfaction with their lives.⁹ Canada ranked 24th out of 29 developed countries based on children and youth's self-reported life satisfaction.¹⁰
2. 65% of families have both parents in the work force by the time children are 3 years of age.¹⁶
3. 79.3% of children and youth feel it's easy to talk with their mothers, meanwhile only 62.6% said it is easy to talk with their fathers.⁹
4. 23.3% of children sometimes go to bed or school hungry because there is not enough food at home.⁹
5. 38% of Canadians, 15 years and older, had at least one immediate or extended family member with either a mental health, emotional or substance misuse problem.¹⁷
6. 24% of men and 38% of women in dual-income families report severe 'time-crunch' stress. 68% of families in Canada have 2 income earners.¹⁸
7. 55% of Canadians, ages 15 years and older, felt close to at least 5 family members living within and outside of their home, while 4% reported having no close relatives. 51% of Canadians 15 years and older had at least 5 close friendships, while 6% reported having none.¹⁹

Communities

1. 84.6% of children and youth feel a strong sense of belonging to their communities.⁹
2. 23.6% of children and youth do not walk or cycle around their neighbourhood.⁹
3. 74.2% of youth have good places to spend free time in their neighbourhoods, and 76.4% are able to walk or cycle to these places and meet friends.⁹
4. 31.5% of youth are not involved in any social groups or activities, and 23.4% of youth say they never or hardly ever meet their friends in person after school.⁹
5. 92.6% of youth across Canada feel safe in their neighbourhood; this varies slightly from province to province with 90.4% in Alberta to 97.4% in Newfoundland.⁹
6. 88% of Canadians are satisfied with their personal safety from crime; Prairie and Territory provinces were less satisfied than Atlantic provinces and Ontario.²⁰
7. 64% of men feel very safe to walk alone in their neighbourhood after dark, compared to 38% of women. Immigrants and visible minorities generally have lower perceptions of safety. In 2015, Canada was ranked the 6th highest OECD country for the proportion of people who feel safe walking in their neighbourhood alone at night.²⁰
8. Families with neighbours they consider to be trustworthy were more likely to feel very safe walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark (60%), in comparison to families who do not trust their neighbours (31%).²⁰

Suggested reference: Tough S, Reynolds N, Walsh JL, Agius M. Connections First: Natural Supports Overview in Alberta. Document of the Connections First Max Bell Foundation and Burns Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship, April, 2020. Available at the [All Our Families](#), [Max Bell Foundation](#), and [Connections First websites](#).

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