

# Enabling Conditions for Policy Progress for Children and Youth

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Linking research, policy and practice:  
Working together for children and youth  
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# Introduction

- You are here to share new developments in research on children and youth
- I am delighted to join that enterprise, and I want to use the opportunity to talk about the challenges of knowledge transfer
- Although CPRN is regarded as a knowledge broker, there is no simple direct route from research to policy to practice. In fact, it is a messy, chaotic route
- The way forward is not clear, but I have some suggestions to put on the table. <sup>2</sup>

# Outline

- Enabling conditions for healthy child development
- Policy successes and disappointments
- The messy relationship between research and policy
- Barriers to policy progress
- Some opportunities ahead

# A societal challenge

- Healthy child development is a family responsibility. But families are nested in their community and in the workplace, and in society. So, child development is a societal challenge.
- Research using the NLSCY has highlighted the importance of parenting and community effects.
- The key challenge for researchers is to show society how and why to invest

# Enabling conditions

- Healthy child development depends on:
  - Adequate income
  - Effective parenting
  - Supportive communities
- The first condition has been a focus for policy (but we haven't fixed the problem)
- But governments are highly conflicted about their role re parenting, communities
- At heart, this is a question of values.
  - What research can do is provide the linking logic to inform societal choices

# A messy relationship

- The route from research to policy implementation is chaotic and unpredictable
- Research is mostly linear logic; while policy making is non-linear -- action and reaction among many policy actors.
- Two key actors are governments and employers. And neither one would naturally choose ECD as their first priority
- Let's look at a few recent examples

# The NCB - a policy success

- National Child Benefit - a breakthrough - a multilateral success with incremental gains
  - In July 1998, federal and provincial governments began to implement the NCB.
  - The first new social investment in many years
    - A mix of income and services for most families, but more generous for poor families
    - Ottawa invested in a refundable tax credit
    - Provinces reinvested savings in services and supports for children -- based on their own preferences / needs
  - Program has been enriched several times, but still far from complete

# Parental leave - another success

- Ottawa extended paid parental leave under EI from 6 months to one year
  - Supported parenting and family income, created choices for parents
  - Encouraged fathers to share in early development
- A unilateral federal decision.
  - But within a year, all the provinces followed through with changes in employment standards re paid parental leave
- Still gaps in access to EI benefits

# Child care -- a disappointment

- No significant investments in child care in most provinces in the 1990s
  - Very large exception is Quebec
- Early childhood programming still patchy
  - Highly targeted to specific disorders
    - Autism, FAS etc are serious problems for some
    - Leaves other children and families stranded
  - Many child development issues ignored
- Child poverty continues to be a serious problem
- So much policy work remains to be done

# What next?

- The progress from 1998 to 2000 narrowed but didn't close the gap between needs and societal contribution.
  - The knowledge base has become even more convincing thanks to the efforts of many
  - Yet, the policy momentum seems to have stalled
- Why has it stalled? Two reasons:
  - Because of basic value conflicts in society
  - And the chaotic and unpredictable relationship between knowledge and policy

# Value conflicts

- Beauvais and Jenson map two paradigms:
  - Family responsibility and investing in children
  - Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and each one is incomplete on its own
  - Family responsibility has governed policy for many decades. But parents options have narrowed. And society has an interest in supporting the development of all children
  - Investing in children ignores adult needs and is not sensitive to low-income need
  - Ideally, we should blend the best of both models to do the best we can for children<sup>41</sup>

# Challenges to knowledge transfer

## – Timing

- Research takes a long time to gestate; policy analysts have no time to go back and review the literature; they want results now

## – Uncertainty

- Academics don't like to call closure on an issue, the truth is always contestable. Policy analysts are looking for certainty, preferably a synthesis

## – Cultures

- Researchers don't know what kind of information is useful at different stages of the policy cycle; when values are in conflict, policy analysts need to know what works

# Key enablers for transfer

- Ministers and DMs create the demand for knowledge and good policy work
  - The political will to learn and then engage
- Windows of opportunity
  - Windows are moments in time when the constellation of political and economic forces create possibilities for shifts in policy direction
  - In the case of NCB, the window had to open simultaneously in many jurisdictions
- The window opened in 1997 and it now appears to be closing. Why?

# The window opened . . .

- Child care initiatives in 1980s died due to lack of money and lack of consensus
- Seeds of the NCB idea were sown in the Social Security Review in 1993
- Sustained and effective advocacy work about child poverty kept pressure on
- Leadership from B.C. and Quebec where momentum was building for new approach
- Trust relationship between federal minister and colleagues - a moment in time
- Etcetera

# Barriers to policy progress

- Fiscal

- Deficits and debt were the key drivers of policy through 90's. 1999-2001 a brief surplus period
- Economic slowdown has created a "chill"

- Political

- Values conflicts on responsibility of families and state still block progress in some jurisdictions
- Turnover of ministers, officials in 1999 impaired collaboration, commitment to children's file

- Jurisdictional

- Federal-provincial relationship soured, despite successful negotiation of Social Union agreement -- new governments, unilateralism, health care<sup>15</sup>

# Possible opportunities

- The landscape has shifted on many fronts
- Where and when will the new windows of opportunity occur?
- And how can the research community make a difference?
- I would not predict new large scale, multi-jurisdictional initiatives, but
- There will be smaller scale opportunities
  - You can lever new themes, new institutions, and new governance models

# A new theme is emerging

- Work-life conflict is becoming an epidemic
- Stress on women and men has risen sharply over decade
  - Becoming a “societal” issue
  - Early documentation of impacts on health care costs, industrial costs (absenteeism, turnover)
  - Impacts all income groups
  - Impacts parents and non-parents
- Could this be the platform to bring employers and state back into action on a range of issues that also affect children?

# New institutions

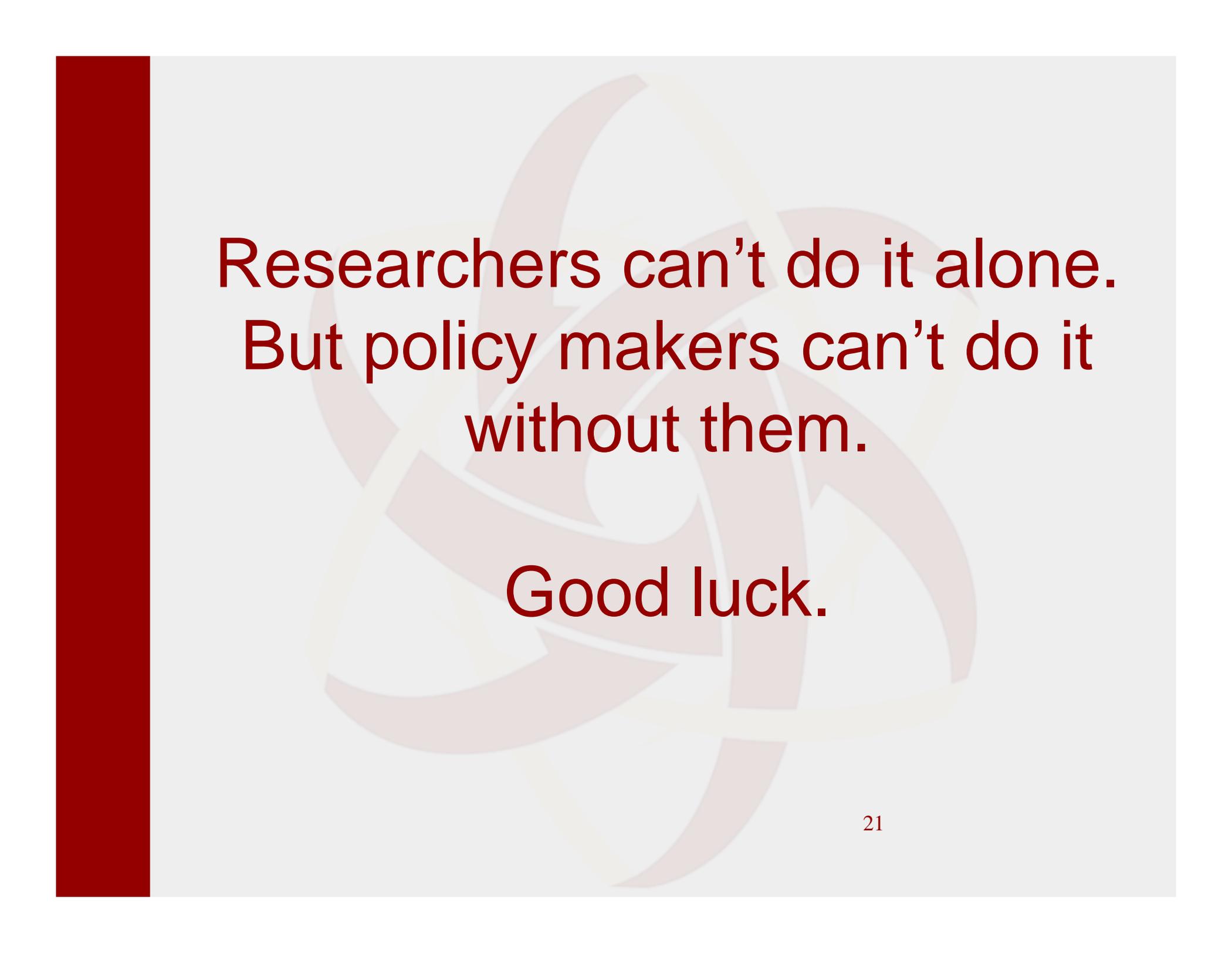
- Regional health authorities are confronted by the spillovers from health to social care
  - A new decision-making authority with the power to think and act horizontally -- spending on social care relieves pressure on health budgets
  - A few are beginning to deal with families and children in a holistic fashion
  - If health reforms begin to integrate primary and acute care, this trend would be reinforced
- Potential for a prevention model to prosper

# New governance models

- As accountability becomes fashionable, there will be resources for careful evaluations and good tracking studies
- Decision-makers want to know what works
  - Self-Sufficiency Project results provide a treasure trove of evidence on welfare-work
  - Results like this can mobilize non-state players -- employers and advocates -- to demand more effective public policy
  - And governments can work with employers and voluntary organizations to achieve shared goals

# The way ahead

- Researchers have to carry on with steady progress on knowledge creation, but
  - Don't miss the opportunities to recycle what you have learned for a new minister (they change often),
  - To link results to new and emerging agendas,
  - To hammer away at defining “what works,”
  - To nurture the social advocates who can help create the windows
  - To create the linking logics that break through the values conflict



Researchers can't do it alone.  
But policy makers can't do it  
without them.

Good luck.

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