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A Holistic and Positive Approach to Childhood Development

CPRN study finds common ground among disciplines

Ottawa – When you strip away professional differences, economists, psychologists and sociologists have remarkably similar ideas about what constitutes desirable child development and this means that raising healthier children can help build a healthier economy and civil society.

A discussion paper from the Canadian Policy Research Networks, *Building Better Outcomes for Canada's Children*, by Jennifer Tipper, MSW, and Denise Avard, Ph.D., maps out a new approach to supporting healthy child development in Canada based on multidisciplinary thinking and focuses on the markers that show children are healthy, rather than the signs that children are falling behind such as smoking, teenage pregnancy or poor eating habits.

The paper was produced for the Canadian Policy Research Network's Family Network as part of its two-year research project looking for answers to the question, *What Is the Best Policy Mix for Canada's Children?* It draws on a wide range of literature and distills the results of a one-day workshop held in Ottawa in November 1998, at which some 16 experts in a variety of fields from across Canada identified five key positive developmental outcomes, which cover childhood from pre-birth to early adulthood:

- Optimal physical well-being
- Learning readiness
- Secure attachments and identity
- Social engagement and competence
- "Smart" risk taking

"This discussion paper attempts to turn conventional approaches to child development on their head by asking the difficult question: What does a healthy child look like?" Canadian Policy Research Networks President Judith Maxwell says. "Sharing knowledge across multiple

disciplines is an important step toward enhancing our understanding of child development and its impact on both our social fabric and our prosperity as a nation."

The five outcomes were chosen because they are broad and generic enough to be relevant across a range of disciplines, yet specific enough to lend themselves to effective research and policy making. As well, they can be applied equally to three well defined stages of human development: infancy and early childhood; childhood; and adolescence. They also represent developmental markers that are of equal value from the psychological, social and economic points of view.

For example, characteristics that contribute to the development of what sociologists or psychologists refer to as "social capacity" also have an impact on what economists call "the accumulation of human capital." In other words, supporting the achievement of these outcomes will help children to meet their developmental potential and, ultimately, grow into valuable, civic-minded workers. "(A) child's ability to build trust and security in relationships, important for subsequent *social well-being*, may, in fact, provide the 'glue' that helps people assemble the components of human capital, necessary for *economic well-being*," the authors write.

Of the five outcomes, "smart risk taking" is the least defined, and may be the best example of the value of multidisciplinary thought, as well as the freshness of outlook of this policy paper. "Smart risk taking" is a critical area of research because the ability to take a calculated risk is something that is often rewarded and highly prized in the labour market. Yet it is relatively unexplored in the context of healthy child development and child policy.

Focusing on the factors that come together to promote healthy child development, the authors add, "allows us to . . . adopt a more holistic, population health approach (and) to seek solutions beyond the boundaries of current research . . . Identifying and measuring positive child outcomes holds a great potential as an essential component of a more responsive, democratic, integrated and coherent process of policy development."

This positive benchmarking is also reflected in the discussions of the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Council of Ministers on Social Policy Renewal. The four goals for a National Children's Agenda are to produce children who are: healthy, physically and emotionally; safe and secure; successful at learning; and socially engaged and responsible.

Building Better Outcomes for Canada's Children makes an important and timely contribution to a discourse that promises to revolutionize our thinking on what constitutes an effective system of policies and programs for raising healthy, happy, secure and productive citizens.

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