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## **Backgrounder**

### **Building Better Outcomes for Canada's Children**

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As a nation on the eve of a new century, we are faced with the challenge of effectively responding to the ever-changing developmental needs of our children. Few would argue that the continued prosperity and cohesion of our country depends on the ability of today's children to meet their developmental potential. This paper attempts to turn conventional approaches to child development on the head by asking the difficult question: What does a healthy child look like?

Answers to this question do not come easily. Every child is different and follows his or her own developmental path, influenced by a broad range of social, economic, biological and environmental factors. Moreover, research in the field has, until recently, been conducted within strict disciplinary boundaries. If we are to be successful as a nation in responding to the needs of our children, we are going to have to bend disciplinary boundaries, reach across sectors, and build solutions together. This is truly a case of 'the whole' being worth more than the sum of its parts.

This paper attempts to launch collaboration and discussion in this area by presenting a set of positive child development outcomes. Drawing from the literature and from the results of a one-day outcome selection workshop hosted by Canadian Policy Research Networks in November 1998, this paper proposes a set of preliminary outcomes which cover the lifespan of a child from before birth to early adulthood. The set is organized around five key outcome domains:

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

There is already a great deal of consensus around child outcomes when the vernacular of different disciplines is stripped away. What remains to be done is to formalize the exchange of information to advance further research in this area. While the set of positive outcomes proposed in this paper is neither exhaustive nor exclusive, it may serve as a bridge in this regard. Reframing child outcomes

also challenges each of us to reconsider what we can do, as citizens and researchers, to help the children of Canada maximize their developmental potential.

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