

A Unique Challenge: Children and Adolescents With Special Needs in Rural and Northern Canada

Ottawa – Many children and youth with special needs in rural and northern Canada lack essential services. Where services do exist, they are often culturally or linguistically inappropriate.

The latest data show that health, prevention and early intervention services and special education are in short supply across the North and in parts of rural Canada. What's more, unique cultural and geographic realities in these regions demand distinctive and innovative approaches to serving children and adolescents with special needs.

A new paper from CPRN and the Centre of Excellence for Children & Adolescents with Special Needs (CECASN) addresses these challenges.

Meeting the Needs of Children and Adolescents with Special Needs in Rural and Northern Canada, is the summary report of a roundtable for policy-makers co-hosted by CPRN and CECASN in Thunder Bay in September, 2005. Roundtable participants reviewed the key findings from the past five years of CECASN's research with an eye to its implications for policy and action.

The report presents policy principles and recommendations for filling the gap in services for children and adolescents with special needs in rural and northern Canada.

According to CECASN research, the current and future well-being of these young people depends on the following policy principles:

- The effective harmonization of policies across federal, provincial/territorial, Aboriginal, regional and local jurisdictions.
- The establishment of culturally sensitive, respectful, collaborative and community-driven approaches to research, policy and practice.
- Community capacity building designed to provide choice and opportunities for children and families.
- Children and families must be able to access information and communicate, including via technology, in their preferred language.

“If we can’t make good on these principles, children with special needs and their families will continue to be at risk and our country will not have delivered on its commitment to be ‘A Canada Fit For All Children’,” says Julia O’Sullivan, National Director, CECASN.

The report’s evidence-based policy recommendations include:

- ***Equitable access to effective services across rural and northern Canada***, including comprehensive child development screening from birth on, a framework for implementing and sustaining use of communication and information technology throughout rural and northern Canada, and a Special Needs Information Service On-line.
- ***Community involvement in all stages of research and service development, provision and evaluation***, along with sustained funding for that purpose.
- ***Develop and provide appropriate education, training and professional development with the highest standards for community members***, adequately funded, and enhanced by best practice distance learning models. Provide a national framework for establishing competency guidelines for child care providers and educators.
- ***Establish a policy network for children and adolescents with special needs in rural and northern Canada***, informed by a national environmental scan of youth with special needs that includes markers for Francophones, Aboriginal status and other cultural specifiers, and funded by government.

Roundtable participants added their own special emphasis to the recommendations.

They argued that the first step in addressing the needs of children and adolescents is increased and sustained collaboration among stakeholders, including community members and government representatives. Key to this, in their view, was better communication at all levels and in all languages of the North.

“What we have here,” says David Hay, Director of CPRN’s Family Network, “is a very good basis for going forward. Acting on these recommendations will make a world of difference to the well-being of children and adolescents with special needs in these regions.”

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CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

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