

Inspiring **Healthy** Futures

A Vision for Canada's
Children, Youth and Families



#WeCANforKids



OUR FOUNDING **PARTNERS**



UNICEF CANADA'S ONE YOUTH

UNICEF Canada's One Youth is working to make Canada the best place in the world to grow up in. As the global UN agency for kids, UNICEF has worked to improve conditions for every child around the world for 75 years, and has saved more children's lives than any other humanitarian organization. UNICEF Canada's One Youth brings that work to Canada by measuring child and youth well-being, and advocating for the right to a childhood.



CHILDREN'S HEALTHCARE CANADA

Children's Healthcare Canada is a national association representing health service delivery organizations serving children and youth across the continuum of care. Through purposeful partnerships, Children's Healthcare Canada accelerates excellence and innovation in health systems caring for children and youth.



PEDIATRIC CHAIRS OF CANADA

The Pediatric Chairs of Canada represents the Department Heads (Chairs) of Pediatrics within the 17 Canadian medical schools. Collectively they provide national leadership in research and education to promote the health and healthcare of children and youth in Canada.



CIHR INSTITUTE OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, CHILD AND YOUTH HEALTH (IHDCYH)

The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) is Canada's federal funding agency for health research. IHDCYH is one of 13 CIHR institutes and supports research that ensures the best start in life for all Canadians and the achievement of their potential for optimal growth and development. CIHR-IHDCYH supports researchers located in universities, hospitals and other research centres, and creates linkages with other stakeholders across Canada.

TOMORROW STARTS **TODAY**

Canadians imagine a better future for children, youth and families.

To make this vision a reality, youth, parents, researchers, educators, advocates, policymakers, service providers, community and business leaders, and others came together to co-create a vision.

It's a commitment that will be the foundation for leaders, organizations and governments to create a healthier, stronger future for children, youth and families in Canada.

That commitment starts now.



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WHY **NOW**

BECAUSE EVERY DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD MATTERS

“This pandemic magnified all of society’s ills and inequities for all to see. If we have an ounce of moral fibre, we must take action. Going back to life prior to COVID-19 is not an option, as that ‘normal’ was not working for a lot of people.”



Canada ranks 30th in child well-being among 38 of the world’s richest countries.



Canada has one of the highest rates of adolescent suicide.



1 in 5 children lives in a household with an income below the poverty line.



Almost 1 in 3 young people do not have basic reading and math skills by age 15.



All of these statistics are worse within vulnerable populations.



On average, rich countries spend 2.38% on family-centred policies. Canada falls behind at only 1.68%.

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AN OVERVIEW

INSPIRING HEALTHY FUTURES

The UNICEF Report Card 16 (2020) ranked Canada 30th out of 38 wealthy countries in the health and well-being of its children – and that was before the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic began to unfold, it became clear that children, youth and families were being affected in unpredictable and enduring ways. Recognizing that transformative change would require a fundamentally new approach, the **CIHR Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health (IHDCYH), Children’s Healthcare Canada, UNICEF Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada** came together to design a pan-Canadian, cross-sector initiative to measurably improve the health and well-being of children, youth and families.

Between September 2020 and March 2021, we talked with more than 1,500 diverse youth, parents, researchers, educators, advocates, policymakers, service providers, community and business leaders, and others. We heard, resoundingly, that this moment of crisis offered an unmissable opportunity for action.

As one participant said, “This pandemic magnified all of society’s ills and inequities for all to see. If we have an ounce of moral fibre, we must take action. Going back to life prior to COVID-19 is not an option, as that ‘normal’ was not working for a lot of people.”

Four global themes to guide collective action emerged from the conversations:



Interdependence. The health and well-being of children, youth and families rely on an interdependent web of factors. A piecemeal approach has not, and will not, work. Meaningful action needs to consider all of these elements in connected ways.



Equity. Children and youth in racialized, Indigenous and marginalized communities, gender-diverse and LGBTQ+ youth, and those with disabilities and complex medical conditions, are at severe disadvantage. Any initiative to improve health and well-being for children, youth and families in Canada must include fundamental principles of equity.



Collaboration. There is a great deal of knowledge, evidence and innovation underway in Canada, but it is challenging to share them and translate them into coordinated action. The community is eager for access to structures for collective action.



Youth and family participation. Young people are willing and critical partners in designing and carrying out meaningful action.

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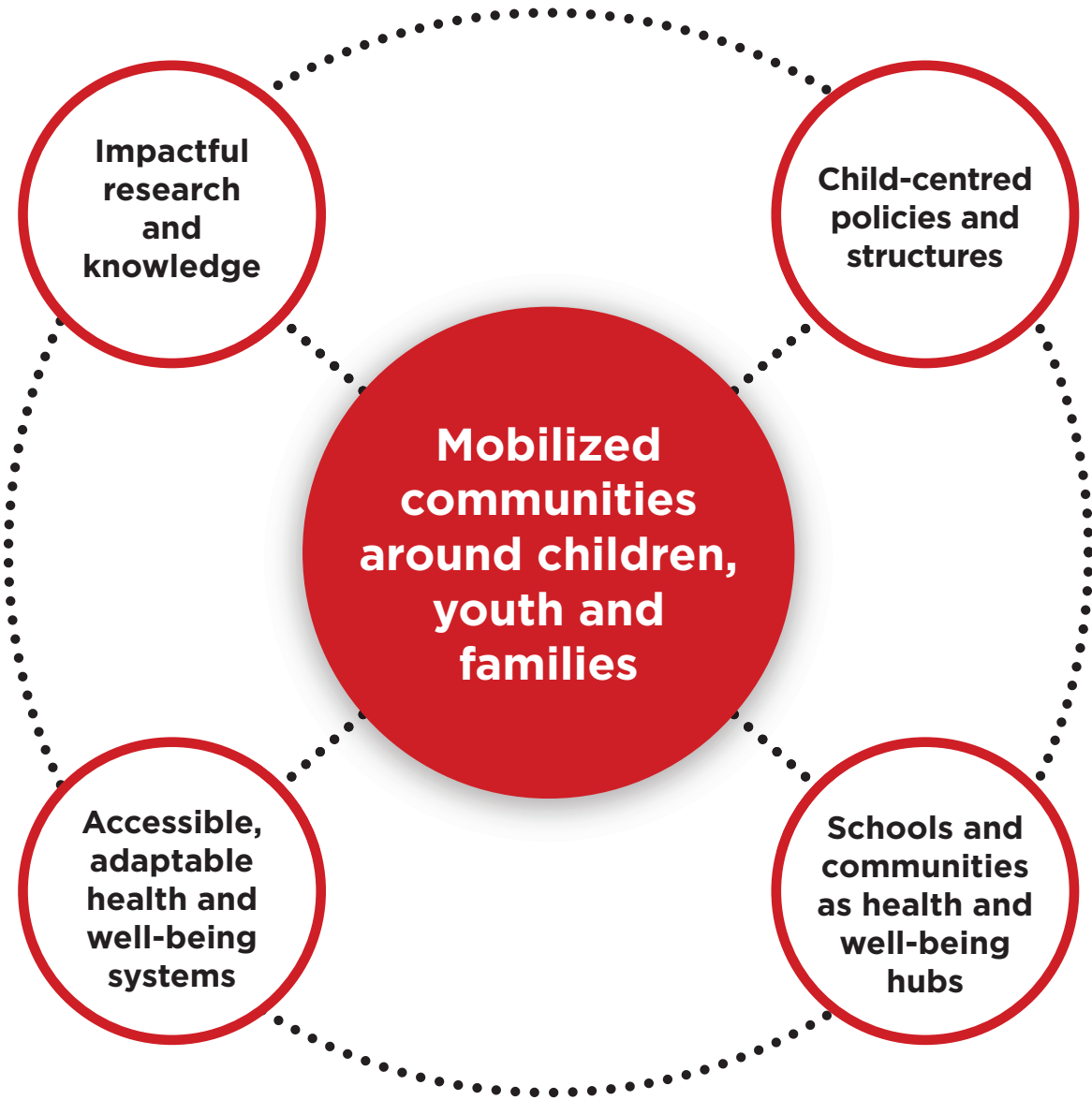
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INTERLINKED PRIORITIES

Together, participants in the Inspiring Healthy Futures initiative created guiding principles, articulated a compelling vision for the future and, ultimately, identified five interlinked action priorities (see diagram).

Recognizing that we will not be successful until or unless we take action in all five areas, this is a vision to guide research, policy, community action, health and well-being systems and local networks, creating a platform for both urgent and ongoing change.



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OUR PURPOSE

- ▶ Bring Canadian stakeholders together to create an integrated vision for a healthier future for children, youth and families.
- ▶ Chart a roadmap that enables child, youth and family institutions, agencies, researchers, care and service providers, and policymakers to align efforts for maximum impact.
- ▶ Ensure that diverse voices are reflected in the priorities identified and that all stakeholders feel heard through this process.

Many people expressed concern about how kids were doing when we launched the Inspiring Healthy Futures initiative in late 2020. The pandemic intensified pre-existing shortcomings and inequities in access to social services, education, healthcare, safe environments, income and other basics of life. It amplified the impact of racial and other structural inequities on health and well-being. And all children, youth and families became engaged in a vast, unplanned experiment about what happens when the educational, childcare, community, familial, social, economic, recreational and therapeutic structures they count on are profoundly disrupted.

Between September 2020 and March 2021, we embarked on a wide-ranging consultation to engage Canadians in conversations about what is most important and urgent for the well-being of children, youth and families. With the slogan “#WeCANforKids,” we aimed to create an actionable, integrated vision to identify Canada-wide priorities to support children, youth and families as the country recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic – a call to action that is impossible to ignore.

Across more than 1,500 touchpoints – with youth, parents, researchers, educators, advocates, policymakers, service providers, community leaders, and others – we heard that many children and their families are not all right.

But we also heard incredible energy and optimism. We heard many

people deeply committed to creating a more equitable, nurturing, healthy, interconnected world. We heard a deep desire to work across jurisdictions, across organizations, and across areas of expertise. And most powerfully, we heard a deep impatience for action. We heard many experts describe how we have a great deal of knowledge and successful innovations, but we haven’t always been successful translating those into robust policy and action. And we heard what we described as “generational impatience,” an overwhelming sense, especially among the youth participants, that we cannot wait one moment longer to act.

“This generation is impatient for change.”



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OUR **PROCESS**

- ▶ We enlisted the Potential Group to co-design an engagement process and worked hard to attract a broad and diverse set of voices by age, identity, geography and discipline – especially from marginalized groups.
- ▶ We gathered a wide range of concerns, aspirations and foundational ideas through virtual focus groups, interviews, social media, and sponsor newsletters.
- ▶ Guiding questions in our initial engagement for Inspiring Healthy Futures were:
 - What is most needed to create healthy lives for all children and youth in Canada?
 - What are the urgent needs generated by the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - How can we work together to shape and create new knowledge and translate knowledge into action?
- ▶ Eight two-hour intensive meetings with people from across all stakeholder groups explored specific topics raised in the first round. Each one resulted in a shared vision and key priorities for both immediate and long-term collaborative action.

([Click here](#) to read about our methodology in more detail, and [here](#) to see a list of team members who carried out this initiative.)



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OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In every conversation we hosted, participants emphasized that a meaningful Canadian vision for health and well-being for children, youth and families absolutely must include fundamental principles of equity and sustainability.

Five guiding principles emerged, capturing a multi-dimensional ethos of inclusion, of true respect for diversity, of equity, of decolonization and indigenization. Against this backdrop, participants repeatedly stressed that structural equity and reform can only come about if we create the space and skills for everyone to reflect on and situate themselves in allyship, in anti-racist practices, and in authentic learning.

These principles have been woven into the vision, and are intended to guide decision-making moving forward.



Recognize all children and youth as rights-holders.



Fully include diverse child, youth and family voices in co-designing policy and programs.



Ensure equitable access to income protection, food security, housing, clean water, safe environments, education and healthcare.



Work toward racial and structural equity, nation-to-nation relationships with Indigenous peoples, and full valuing of diverse worldviews.



Embed child and youth needs and environmental sustainability into all policy and decision-making.

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OUR KEY FINDINGS

TO THRIVE, CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES NEED MULTI-DIMENSIONAL SUPPORT

Children’s lives are multi-dimensional, and it quickly became clear that solutions must be as well. Children and youth cannot thrive without:



1 The basics of life. This means a reliable income, food security, good housing, a safe environment, clean water, learning and literacy, development support and childcare, and access to the internet.



2 Accessible mental and physical healthcare services, that are easily navigated and designed to support the unique needs of each child, youth and family.



3 Feeling love and a sense of belonging, and having opportunities for unstructured leisure and play. This includes access to outdoor recreation and green space. For this to happen, families and young people need support.



4 Racial, gender and structural equity. It’s not possible to talk about thriving futures for children and youth without fully engaging with racial justice and gender equity.



5 Their voices being heard. Children, youth and families cannot flourish if they feel their voices are not heard, and if they have no hope for the future.

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FIVE PRIORITIES FOR **SYSTEMIC CHANGE**

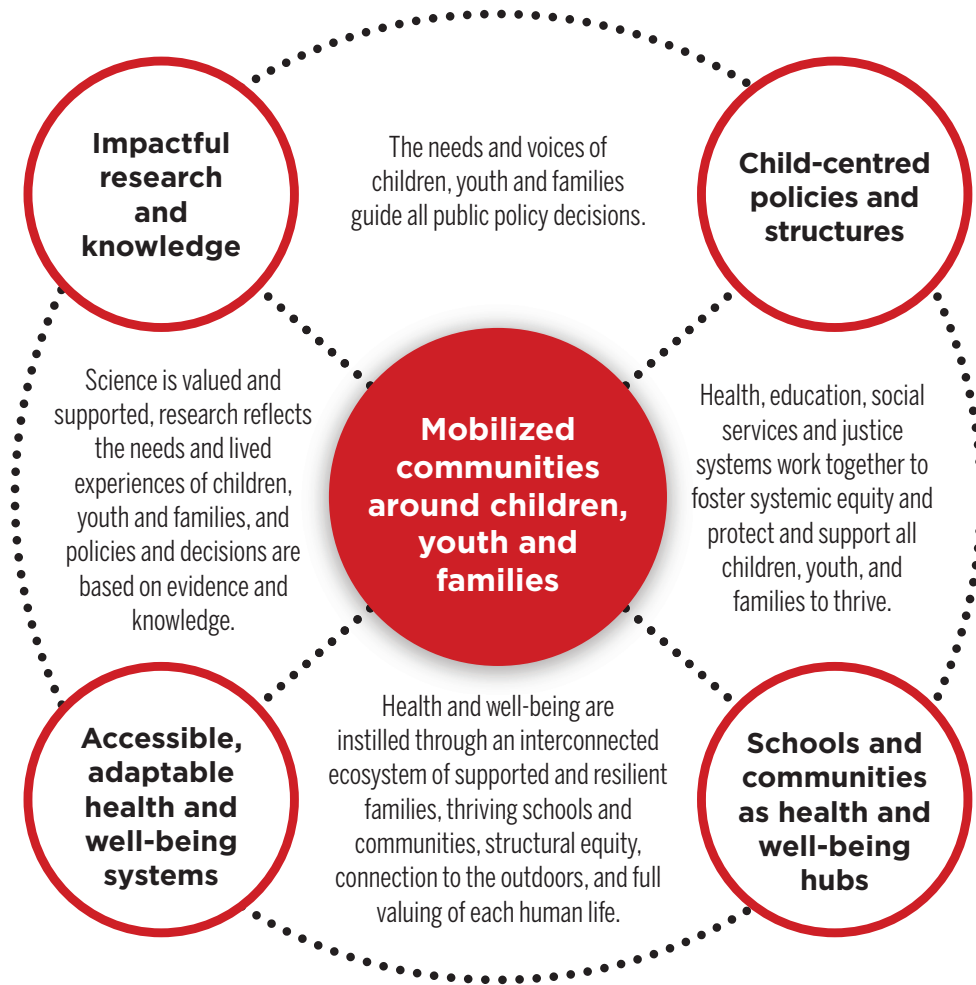
We are aiming for a Canada where every child, youth and family feels hope, safety, optimism, love and belonging, and is thriving as part of an ecosystem that fully nurtures health and well-being.

We already know a great many things about how to foster healthy children, youth and families. Overwhelmingly, participants expressed the need to focus on mobilizing existing knowledge, and collaborating to find new ways to turn research, innovation and promising new ideas into policy and action. Budgets, policies, systems, research and programs are typically fragmented. Inspiring Healthy Futures confirmed that each stakeholder needs to look across the multidimensional framework of children’s lives and seek to connect to other spheres of knowledge and action. If we don’t share the same priorities, then we must connect them. This can only happen within an interwoven system of knowledge, community, policy and adaptable healthcare, social services and social protection, child development and education and justice.

At the centre of the vision are mobilized communities, spanning youth initiatives, research collaborations, grassroots parent groups, advocacy initiatives and community and industry partnerships. These active, robust, empowered groups will translate the ideas and knowledge of different stakeholders into action.

Detailed actions within each priority have been identified, creating a long-term, unified agenda for meaningful change.

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MOBILIZED COMMUNITIES AROUND **CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES**

We want to avoid making change an “us” versus “them” situation – allyship across generations is a must.

Strategic Goals:

With child, youth and family voices at the centre, create opportunities for everyone working in or concerned about the well-being of children, youth and families to connect, collaborate, build relationships, share resources and knowledge, and mobilize toward change.

1. **Create a national child, youth and family hub** (“network of networks”), to connect a community of care spanning research, policy, systems, advocacy and services around children, youth and families. Building on and connecting existing networks and platforms:
 - ▶ **Engage children and youth** through creative outreach and embed their voices in the centre of the network.
 - ▶ **Create communities of practice, advocacy and support** (e.g., mental health, childhood disabilities and rare childhood disease, community resources for early learning, anti-racism in school curricula, etc.).
 - ▶ **Develop mechanisms** to share data and resources and to mobilize knowledge.
 - ▶ **Build capacity** for integrating anti-racist practices, decolonizing structures and working in full partnership with First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.

2. **Mobilize community action** around child, youth and family-oriented needs for COVID-19 recovery, including child, youth and parent/caregiver mental health:
 - ▶ Support innovation in and expanded reach of **youth engagement and participation** opportunities.
 - ▶ Create **public/private partnerships** for rapid COVID-19 recovery initiatives around children, youth and families (e.g., employment opportunities, sponsorships for mental health initiatives and community spaces, social impact bonds for micro-grants and loans).
3. **Build child, youth and family capacity to initiate and participate in change leadership** and service co-design, and adult capacity to act as allies to diverse youth.
4. **Empower children, youth and families** by involving them in decision-making. For example, lower the voting age so young people can participate in the next election (in any jurisdiction) and shape the policies that will shape their futures as Canada emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Teenagers need to feel hopeful and related to – something they learn from the people around them. They need social interaction with teens and adults to be able to learn how to see the future and be hopeful. Teens who aren’t able to be hopeful – we need to empower them to make decisions that will lead to more optimism. What decisions can they make towards a better future?”

“Engagement has to be meaningful. Adults sometimes think they need to have a pizza party and ask one or two questions. And then the youth never hear anything about the situation again. We want to talk about meaningful issues in a meaningful way.”

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IMPACTFUL RESEARCH AND **KNOWLEDGE**

How can research focus on health and resilience from before birth through childhood? What does primary prevention look like? How do we build health rather than treating illness?

Strategic Goals:

Research will be recognized as a critical part of the ecosystem for family and child health and well-being, Canadians will be engaged in and see and feel the impact of our research, evidence will be integrated seamlessly into Canadian policy and practice, and we will have a sustainable and integrated research sphere.

1. Create **guiding research strategies** across the full continuum of research from biomedical to translational, with lifecycle, cross-disciplinary, equity lenses to foster research.
2. **Develop a lifecycle approach** to understanding health and well-being from pre-conception through to later life.
3. Work in partnership to identify the most pressing health concerns, and address them through **new knowledge generation from “bench to neighbourhood.”** Topics that were highlighted include addressing inequities in vulnerable populations, extending virtual learning and care, and the value of outdoor play for resilience and development.
4. **Accelerate mobilization of knowledge to policy, practice and health promotion**, empowering Canadians to make evidence-informed decisions.

5. Develop a **comprehensive, cross-disciplinary approach to understanding and mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on health, education, well-being and social development**; family finances; at-risk and transitional youth; and learning and development, and how to support equitable solutions for recovery.
6. Develop a comprehensive **open, accessible data strategy** across research communities.
7. Develop sustainable approaches for the **equitable integration of youth, child and family voices** into the research agenda.
8. In partnership with First Nations, Métis and Inuit **communities, develop evidence and guidelines for health, education and social services that reflect cultural needs.**
9. Support **sustainable and equitable career pathways for researchers** to build capacity for research time and incentivize inter-disciplinary ways of delivering on health research impact.

“It’s important to reflect on what we learned from COVID – existing inequities have been revealed, AND why were some people able to thrive? And what has been shunted aside that we need to reprioritize?”

“We need to break down the boundaries between disciplines, between funding sources, to work together to understand how to improve the health and well-being of children that includes physical and mental health, learning, social development, education, justice – and which includes the health and well-being of their parents, grandparents and communities.”

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CHILD-CENTRED **POLICIES AND STRUCTURES**

We have seen over and over that every single policy and decision we make as a country has an impact on children, youth and families, not just the ones that are specifically about them. We need to make a decision that we will use a child impact lens for every single decision we make.

Strategic Goals:

Every policy and decision made by government, communities and institutions will have a child, youth and family lens, and decision-makers will work together across jurisdictions, departments and other spheres of influence.

- 1. Increase the will and capacity of governments** and other authorities to incorporate child-friendly decision-making protocols and practices. Key practices include:
 - ▶ **Coordinate policy** across federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions, and work across departments on comprehensive, coherent child-friendly policies.
 - ▶ **Incorporate child impact assessments**, with an equity lens, into all policy developed by government.
 - ▶ **Improve data and outcomes monitoring** of child and youth well-being, including disaggregated data to track inequities and a national, longitudinal survey, ensuring that the people affected are involved in design and respecting Indigenous data sovereignty.
 - ▶ **Include child and youth indicators** in the federal well-being budget framework and track equitable public investment in children and youth.

- 2. Establish a non-partisan federal accountability office** for and with children and youth, guided by the voices of children and youth and fully respecting and advancing the rights and self-determination of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and youth.
- 3. Ensure the right** of every child, youth and family to access high speed internet.
- 4. Introduce the Canada Youth Guarantee**, so every youth is provided with support to reconnect with school and recover learning; every youth in transition is assured a place in post-secondary education, training or employment until the pre-pandemic rate of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET rate) is achieved; and youth in care have broad and flexible transitional supports.
- 5. Increase the Canada Child Benefit** to ensure no child falls below the poverty line, without exception, and reform the system of child benefits to increase equity, access and flexibility. Increase support to families who care for children with disabilities and/or medically complex needs and to children in care, and provide continuity for youth in care to support lives of dignity and opportunity.
- 6. Provide universal pre-natal income support and parental leave** for every child in the first year of life and a flexible program of leave through childhood.

“We need some kind of non-partisan central body to advocate for all children and youth federally and provincially – but we need to learn from the past and make sure it’s a decolonized approach, and that it’s led by and accountable to youth and children.”

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SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES AS **HEALTH AND WELL-BEING HUBS**

This isn't even my field, but this is the idea that excites me the most!

Strategic Goals:

Schools and communities will be dynamic hubs to connect parents, children and youth to the resources, outdoor and recreational space and social connection they need for health and well-being.

1. **Recognize the role of schools** as “child and youth development centres,” ensuring that every child has access to child care, quality early learning, developmental and social care, and access to necessary diagnoses, therapy and early intervention, and that parents are fully engaged as partners and peer supports.
2. Ensure every child has **access to a free, healthy meal** every school day.
3. **Build capacity among educators and service providers** for authentic understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit worldviews, anti-oppression practices and anti-racism.
4. Provide **culturally responsive mental health** (psychosocial) “**first aid**” training to every teacher, youth service provider and parent.
5. Create opportunities for **schools as incubators** of youth-led change initiatives. This could be achieved by integrating schools into the network of youth hubs described in “Mobilized Communities.”
6. Launch the **Child-Friendly Cities Initiative** to foster child-centred local governance and create community space for well-being and connection.

7. Mobilize local advocacy and private/public partnerships for **equitable access to land and the natural environment, free play, and recreation and arts initiatives.**
8. Increase investment in **networked, culturally appropriate family resource programs** to expand early child development, child health, parenting support and future-planning programs including education, career and financial planning.

“Unstructured, outdoor play is essential for development and well-being – we need scraped knees, not carpet burns.”

“Early intervention is one of the most important COVID recovery practices we could commit to as a community.”



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ACCESSIBLE, ADAPTABLE, **HEALTH AND WELL-BEING SYSTEMS**

If we could transform the system of health and services to be more accessible and easy to navigate, that would be the most profound change we could make.

Strategic Goals:

All children, youth and families will have timely, simple access to an integrated, family-centred system of physical and mental health related services and benefits, flexible to each family's needs.

1. Ensure every First Nations, Métis and Inuit child, youth and family has a **stable and sustainable community source of clean water** by the end of 2021.
2. Adapt a **consistent approach to health** where the child's physical and mental health needs are delivered through a fully integrated system of care regardless of where the service is being delivered (hospital, home, community, school, respite, etc.).
3. Ensure **timely and appropriate access** to child and youth mental health services, child development services, and services for children, youth and families with disabilities and medical complexities, delivered close to home and fully funded through the health system.
4. **Work in full partnership** with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities on health programs, practices and guidelines that meet cultural needs and respect sovereignty.
5. Create an **integrated health and social service record**, accessible to parents and health service providers, with de-identified data made available to researchers.

6. Develop and implement a consistent and comprehensive data set to be collected wherever the service is delivered, comparable across jurisdictions, to **measure children's health, healthcare and health outcomes**, with linkages to education and other key data.
7. **Evaluate the implementation of outcomes** associated with the rapid roll out of virtual delivery of health services. **Identify opportunities** to further expand access to evidence-based, appropriate virtual health services for children, youth and families.
8. Ensure all children and youth have access to approved safe and effective medications through a **national pharmacare strategy** that mandates universal, portable and comprehensive drug coverage.
9. Fully fund and implement **Jordan's Principle** and the **Spirit Bear Plan**.
10. Continue to invest in **precision and personalized health innovation** related to childhood rare disease and other research priorities.

"We need an integrated approach to health care that takes into consideration the circumstances in which individual kids, youth and families find themselves. COVID-19 rates by postal code are deeply distressing."

"Families with children with medical complexities, disabilities or developmental issues have lost so much ground because of the pandemic. We need to rally behind supporting the most fragile children in our community, and we need to support families with flexible resources that allow them to meet their own needs."

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HOW WE WILL MEASURE OUR **PROGRESS**

Evaluation of the Inspiring Healthy Futures initiative will be comprehensive, multi-pronged, and integrated throughout our work; evaluation findings will be used to continuously improve our efforts, to report on our impact and to inform the ongoing evolution of Inspiring Healthy Futures.

Like all elements of Inspiring Healthy Futures, the monitoring and evaluation plan will be co-created and informed by diverse stakeholder perspectives. Taking a developmental approach to evaluation will support learning, innovation and advancement; this approach allows for not just reporting on progress, but also for useful insights to inform the ongoing evolution of the initiative.

Finally, a developmental evaluation plan supports assessing movement on each of the five priority areas in an iterative fashion, while providing the flexibility needed to meet the ever-evolving evidence needs of our multiple and diverse stakeholders, partners, and sponsors. The iterative and reflective nature of developmental evaluation will allow us to capture and apply learnings from early phases of our work to subsequent phases. For example, reflections on the processes and approach used to develop the Inspiring Healthy Futures vision, are being used to guide subsequent steps for implementation such as communications planning, engagement with stakeholders, and action planning. By reporting on lessons learned at each stage of the process we are able to be accountable to, and share learnings with, our stakeholders.

The broad intention of Inspiring Healthy Futures is to **measurably improve** health and well-being for and with children, youth and families. Inspiring Healthy Futures will use the UNICEF Report Card 16 (2020) as a baseline for comparison in assessing progress on fundamental child and youth outcomes. The evaluation plan will also connect actions within and across the four priority areas to these and other measurable outcomes that together support improved health and well-being for Canadian children, youth and families. To ensure a shared approach to measurement and reporting, categories of indicators will be co-created to provide

guidance to various stakeholder groups to conduct or contribute to evaluation activities that are meaningful and useful for their individual contexts and evidence needs, while remaining aligned with reporting on system wide outcomes.

Key areas of focus for evaluation in early phases include assessing the implementation and impact of key elements of the acceleration agenda including a) collaboration, b) integration of research evidence, and c) advocating for a child, youth and family friendly approach to pandemic recovery.



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Child-Centred Policies
and Structures

Schools and Communities as
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Accessible, Adaptable, Health
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How We Will Measure our Progress

The Last Word

THE LAST **WORD**

The youth who participated in the Inspiring Healthy Futures process envision a future where:

- ▶ Racial and gender equity and belonging can be taken for granted.
- ▶ Everyone has access to the basics of life.
- ▶ Climate change and clean environments are priorities.
- ▶ The voices of children and youth are fully engaged in shaping decisions.
- ▶ Parents of children with disabilities and complex needs are fully surrounded by a flexible health and support system that fosters autonomy and resilience.
- ▶ First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities can take for granted clean water, access to education, and health and developmental services that are guided by their cultures.
- ▶ We no longer experience profound health and well-being inequities along racial and cultural lines.
- ▶ Science and research are well funded and understood to be critical elements for a thriving, functioning social world.

Across all participants there was a powerful sentiment that the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic offers an unmissable opportunity to act.

Taking action means understanding and rectifying the impact of the pandemic on children, youth and families. It means taking this opportunity to “rewrite the rules” for policy, investment, innovation and partnerships that support all children, youth and families to thrive. It means working together in new, unrelenting ways to create a more integrated and decolonized system of health, social services and social protection.

Inspiring Healthy Futures is a launching point for mobilizing committed, passionate and undaunted communities in a shared mission.



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A Vision for Canada's
Children, Youth and Families

www.InspiringHealthyFutures.ca