

A healthy start in life is key to long-term well-being

The persistence of poverty compromises the immediate and long-term health, social development and cognitive ability of our future generations. Children who live in poverty encounter more hurdles to healthy development and are at an elevated risk for a wide range of negative outcomes to their health and wellbeing. Research shows that poor children are more likely to experience a host of negative outcomes including lower functioning vision, hearing, speech, mobility, dexterity, and cognition. Poor children are also less likely to live in safe neighbourhoods and are at a disproportionate risk of exposure to environmental contaminants.

A national commitment to the health and well-being of children and families requires a shift in public policy priorities. The inordinate spending on debt reduction and tax cuts - which mostly benefit those who are well-off - dominated government agendas over the past decade but did little to substantially reduce child and family poverty. Families lost critical social and economic supports which helps explain why so many are no further ahead despite the strength of the economy. Instead, inequality between the wealthiest and poorest groups in Canada has grown.

Investments in preventative measures and health promotion should be an integral part of Canada's health system. We also need to do a much better job of protecting the environments where children and families live. A collective commitment to the health and well-being of children and families requires a shift in public policy priorities. The recent focus on tax cuts has not been successful in substantially reducing child and family poverty. Instead, it has contributed to the severe reduction of social and economic supports to families over the past decade. For instance, there is only regulated child care to serve one out of ten children under twelve in Canada. And with the freeze on social housing across Canada, affordable units are increasingly out of reach for many families. In the midst of prosperity, low income families with children are living, on average, more than \$9,000 below the poverty line.

We know what it takes to make a difference. Those nations that have done a much better job in reducing child and family poverty than Canada have done it through a healthy stock of good jobs, generous income security and unemployment benefits, national affordable housing programs as well as widely accessible early childhood education and care programs.

Helpful Links:

Social Determinants of Health Across the Life Span: Conference Resources

<http://www.socialjustice.org/conference/program.htm>

Health Canada - Population Health Approach

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/phdd/determinants/>

The impact of poverty on the health of children and youth

A research report by Rachel Singer.

http://www.campaign2000.ca/res/Poverty_healthbackgrounder.pdf