

Building naturally supportive communities to promote well-being

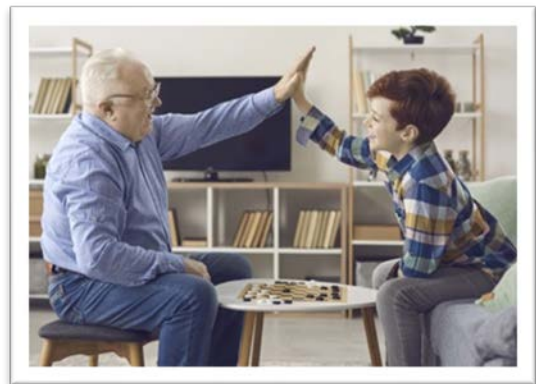
The current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, and why children and youth may be particularly vulnerable:

Canadians' mental health and well-being have been impacted by social isolation, physical distancing and closure of workplaces, schools and recreation spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 data collected from Calgary families suggests that up to 35% of mothers experienced increased stress, anxiety and depression; and 30% of caregivers were concerned about their child's behaviour and mood.¹ Children and youth, because of their brain and social-emotional development stage, are particularly vulnerable to COVID-related disruptions.^{2,3} Strategies that enhance mental health and well-being, such as a **natural supports approach** can enable children and youth to thrive through supportive interactions, relationships and friendly environments.

What are natural supports, and why are they important?

For me: Natural supports are informal give-and-take social connections.⁴ In addition to relationships with friends and family, they include interactions with neighbours, mentors, organizations and local businesses. These occur wherever people intersect, such as libraries, parks, and grocery stores. These connections create a sense of belonging, help develop skills, reduce stress, and increase well-being.

For children and youth: Children and youth with natural supports are less likely to commit crimes, like



¹ McDonald S, Edwards S, Hetherington E, et al. *Experiences of Albertan families with young children during the COVID-19 pandemic: Descriptive report*. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary; 2020.

² Tombeau Cost K, Crosbie J, Anagnostou E, et al. Mostly worse, occasionally better: Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Canadian children and adolescents. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. 2021;Online:1-14.

³ Vigo D, Patten SB, Pajer K, et al. Mental health of communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. 2020;65(10):681-687.

⁴ The Change Collective. Working with vulnerable youth to enhance their natural supports: A practice framework; 2018, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

assault and theft,⁵ and are more likely to be successful in school.^{6,7} Natural supports also enhance mental health.^{8,9,10} However, almost 30% of Canadian children report they have “no important adults” in their lives.¹¹ and many have difficulties making friends,¹² which suggests an absence of natural supports. Investing in approaches that build supportive relationships and environments can enable our children and youth to thrive.

Why communities?

Communities are best positioned to understand and support the needs of local residents.

Naturally supportive communities create opportunities for activities that will enhance safety, security and sense of belonging; all essential to building resilient communities and residents.

What can I do to create more naturally supportive communities?

- **Tell people about why natural supports are important:** Spread the word about natural supports and how they can benefit your community.
- **Participate in and promote social snacking:** Social snacks are brief, positive interactions in daily events that contribute to well-being and promote a sense of belonging.¹²⁻¹⁴ These interactions can result in the release of the hormone, oxytocin.¹⁵ This leaves giver and receiver feeling good, and builds feelings of trust. Examples of these actions include saying hello to your neighbour while walking outside, or chatting with someone at the grocery store. Practice saying hello to people you don't know.
- **Ask community leadership if they are using a natural supports approach:** Connect with community leadership and those active in your community to see what is currently in place, and what you can do to participate.

⁵ Brown SM, Shillington AM. Childhood adversity and the risk of substance use and delinquency: The role of protective adult relationships. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2017;63:211-221.

⁶ Bruce M, Bridgeland J. *The mentoring effect: Young people's perspectives on the outcomes and availability of mentoring*. Washington D.C.: MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership;2014.

⁷ Lenzi M, Vieno A, Santinello M, Perkins DD. How neighborhood structural and institutional features can shape neighborhood social connectedness: A multilevel study of adolescent perceptions. *American Journal of Community Psychology*. 2013;51:451-467.

⁸ McLafferty M, O'Neill S, Armour C, Murphy S, Bunting B. The mediating role of various types of social networks on psychopathology following adverse childhood experiences. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. 2018;238:547-553.

⁹ Oberle E, Schonert-Reichl KA, Guhn M, Zumbo BD, Hertzman C. The role of supportive adults in promoting positive development in middle childhood: A population-based study. 2014;29(4):296-316.

¹⁰ Ungar M. The impact of youth-adult relationships on resilience. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*. 2013;4(3):328-336.

¹¹ The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP). *The Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI): MDI data trends summary 2018/19*. British Columbia, Canada: School of Population and Public Health with the University of British Columbia; 2019.

¹² UNICEF Canada. *Worlds apart: Canadian companion to UNICEF Report Card 16*. Toronto, Canada: UNICEF Canada; 2020.

- **Create spaces, participate in activities, and build a sense of belonging in your community:** Connect with businesses, not-for-profits, Community Associations or Leagues, schools, etc., to find spaces and create activities where community members can meet up and connect. Engaging with your community will build a greater sense of safety and belonging.



Additional resources:

Please visit the Connections First website if you would like additional resources, including evidence summaries, indicators, infographics, and a guide to building naturally supportive communities:

www.connectionsfirst.ca

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