Building naturally supportive communities to promote well-being: A policy brief

With social isolation and physical distancing protocols implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for strategies that promote social connections to "build back better" post-pandemic. A natural supports approach will enable the development of supportive relationships and environments. Natural supports are informal give-and-take connections that consist of both brief interactions and close relationships that protect and promote positive mental health and well-being within all populations, especially those that are vulnerable. Key actions of social snacking, and engaging with residents and those that work in the community can build naturally supportive communities. Social snacks are brief positive interactions in daily events that contribute to sense of belonging and well-being. Policy options for provincial and federal government are presented to fill current policy gaps to promote uptake of natural supports approaches.

The current context with the COVID-19 pandemic

A notable increase in mental and physical health issues have been reported worldwide from the COVID-19 pandemic physical distancing and social isolation protocols, and closure of workplaces, schools and recreation spaces. Children and youth, because of brain and social-emotional development stage, are particularly vulnerable to COVID-related disruption.[1,2] COVID-19 data collected in 2020 from Calgary families suggest that up to 35% of mothers experienced increased stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms; and approximately 30% of caregivers were concerned about their child's behaviour and mood.[3] Furthermore, to address child and youth distress, the Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) recently called for the Government of Ontario to safely re-open schools and outdoor recreation spaces. The CPS reported approximately 70% of children and youth experienced worsening mental health during the pandemic, and that alarming numbers of children and youth were presenting to clinics and hospitals with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance misuse.[4,5,6] Drs. Douglas Mack and Martha Fulford, Assistant Clinical Professor in Paediatrics and Associate Professor

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[1] 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.

[2] 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.

[3] 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.

[4] Op. cit. 1.

[5] Feldman M, Dow K, Lau E, Korczak D. Canada: Canadian Paediatric Society; February 1, 2021.

[6] Lau E, Dow K, Feldman M. Canada: Canadian Paediatric Society; May 7, 2021.

in Medicine, respectively, at McMaster University, warn that these closures and lack of social interaction will likely have negative long-term effects:[7]

> "These imprinted patterns of behaviour for learning, socialization and exercise can and will persist throughout childhood, adolescent and adult lives. Schools are fundamental to the health and success of our youth at a time when their development is being so importantly shaped. Our educational investment is time-sensitive and these social and educational deficiencies are likely to endure in many of our children, especially the underprivileged."

With the negative influence of social isolation and loneliness on health outcomes well established, there is a need to identify strategies which promote positive mental health and well-being, and support child and youth development. Using a natural supports approach can build supportive relationships and environments enabling families and residents to thrive.

What are natural supports, and why are they important?

Natural supports are informal reciprocal connections that consist of close relationships with friends and family, and broader associations, including neighbours, mentors, organizations and local businesses.[8] These connections promote skill development, problem-solving, and sense of belonging. They also decrease the influence of adversity and are protective for positive mental health and well-being.[9,10,11]
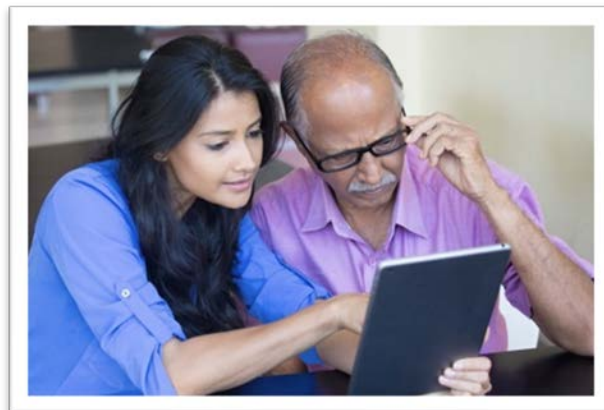
Children and youth with supportive relationships and environments are less likely to participate in antisocial behaviours, including assault and theft,[12]

[7] Mack D, Fulford M. Opinion: We're failing our children - socially, mentally and physically - by keeping them out of school. *National Post.* May 25, 2021.

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

[9] 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.

[10] 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.

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

[12] Brown SM, Shillington AM. Childhood adversity and the risk of substance use and delinquency: The role of protective adult relationships. *Child Abuse & Neglect.* 2017;63:211-22.

and are more likely to be successful academically.[13,14] However, Canadian data suggests the proportion of children reporting that they have "no important adults" in their lives has increased from 15% in 2017-2018 to 29% in 2018-2019;[15] and children have increasing difficulties making friends.[16] While the majority of Canadian children appear to have at least one natural support, these trends of having fewer relationships reveals a need to create more supportive connections and environments for our children and youth; communities are one such environment. A natural supports approach is ideal because while vulnerable children and youth with poorer mental health and fewer life skills may benefit the most, these connections can benefit the whole community.

Why should we focus on communities?

Communities are uniquely positioned to identify and support local needs, and can also build upon public investments in health and well-being.[17] Strategies that optimize security, safety and belonging enhance the likelihood of individual competency, have a high return on investment, and are more likely to be sustainable. Natural supports are an approach through which individuals experience safety, security and belonging, and can be used to build naturally supportive communities. Dr. Michael Ungar, Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience, emphasizes the importance of a supportive environment for resilience and well-being:[18]

> "The science shows that all the internal resources we can muster are seldom much use without a nurturing environment. Furthermore, if those resources are not immediately at hand, we are better off trying to change our world to gain those resources than we are trying to change ourselves…These resources, more than individual talent or positive attitude, accounted for the difference between youths who did well and those who slid into drug addiction, truancy and high-risk sexual activity."

[13] 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.

[14] 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.

[15] 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.

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

[17] Born P. *Community Conversations: Mobilizing the ideas, skills, and passion of community organizations, governments, businesses, and people.* 2nd ed. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: BPS Books; 2012.

[18] Ungar M. Put down the self-help books. Resilience is not a DIY endeavour. *The Globe and Mail.* May 25, 2019; Opinion.

What are key actions that can create naturally supportive communities?

- **Promote and engage in social snacking**: Brief, informal positive interactions in daily events, or social snacking, are key actions that contribute to well-being, and can promote sense of belonging.[19,20,21] Examples of these actions include saying hello to your neighbour while walking outside, and offering your seat on the bus. These interactions cause the release of the hormone, oxytocin,[22] which leaves both giver and receiver feeling good, builds feelings of trust, and, ultimately, can result in individuals and families contributing positively to their community. Social snacking, in particular, is a sustainable action with great uptake potential since the only requirements are awareness and conscious actions. Promotion of these actions can include the practice of saying hello to people you don't know. Social snacking is a key precursor to building naturally supportive communities.

- **Engage with residents and those that work within the community**: Engaging with residents and those working in the community, such as engagement coordinators, Community Association or League representatives, block or neighbourhood connectors, and Community Social Workers, are key to identify community-specific assets, as well as barriers, to natural supports approaches:[23]
    a. Strategies that build on and leverage existing assets (i.e., resources and attributes) within a community are more likely to be successful and sustainable in comparison to those that utilize external resources.[24]
    b. Assets that facilitate engagement and educate on the importance of participation and connection within the community will contribute to building naturally supportive communities. These include residents and community workers that champion natural supports approaches, and provision of training and support for communication modalities such as community newsletters and social media. Education is key because oftentimes the

[19] Hipp JR, Perrin A. Nested loyalties: Local networks' effects on neighbourhood and community cohesion. *Urban Studies.* 2006;43(13):2503-2523.

[20] Sandstrom GM, Dunn EW. Social interactions and well-being: The surprising power of weak ties. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin.* 2014;40(7):910-922.

[21] Szreter S, Woolcock M. Health by association? Social capital, social theory, and the political economy of public health. *International Journal of Epidemiology.* 2004;33(650-667).

[22] Zak PJ, Kurzban R, Matzner WT. Oxytocin is associated with human trustworthiness. *Hormones and Behavior.* 2005;48(5):522-527.

[23] Tough SC, Reynolds N, Walsh J-L, Agius M. *Natural supports evidence overview.* Calgary, Alberta, Canada: Connections First Max Bell Foundation & Burns Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship; 2020.

[24] Laverack G, Mohammadi NK. What remains for the future: Strengthening community actions to become an integral part of health promotion practice. *Health Promotion International.* 2011;26:ii258-ii262.

concepts of naturally supportive connections and environments are intuitive, but the practice of saying hello, for example, is not.

c. Awareness of potential bylaws, legalities and policies that currently limit or inhibit opportunities is required to advance natural supports approaches within communities. Implementation of policy and bylaws that reduce risk of litigation, while ensuring safety, would lessen existing barriers for volunteers and community workers.

The current opportunity

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased people's understanding of the importance of their neighbours and the community they live in.[25] Additionally, 70% of Canadians reported a greater appreciation for parks and green spaces, and 82% reported that these spaces became more important to their mental health during the pandemic.[26] With increased awareness of the local community, including parks and green spaces, there in an opportunity to re-invest in our communities to optimize well-being through an innovative and sustainable natural supports approach.

The current policy climate

Natural supports are gaining multi-sectoral traction within Alberta. To date, natural supports are included in provincial and municipal documents, such as Government of Alberta Children's Services *Well-being and Resiliency: A Framework for Supporting Safe and Healthy Children and Families;*[27] City of

[25] Rutter J, Puddle J, Ballinger S, Buckerfield L, Hickmott L, Katwala S. *Our chance to reconnect: Final report of the Talk/together project.* United Kingdom: British Future for the Together Coalition; 2021.

[26] Charnock S, Heisz A, Kaddatz J, Spinks N, Mann R. *Canadians' well-being in year one of the COVID-19 pandemic.* Canada: Statistics Canada, and The Vanier Institute of the Family; 2021.

[27] Ministry of Children's Services. *Well-being and Resiliency: A Framework for Supporting Safe and Healthy Children and Families.* Alberta, Canada: Government of Alberta; 2019.

Calgary *Mental Health and Addiction Community Strategy and Action Plan*;[28] and Boys and Girls Clubs Big Brothers Big Sisters *Strategic Directions*.[29] There is growing interest expressed from a range of provincial ministries to include natural supports approaches in their work and policies. Several community organizations are also currently considering initiation of social snacking campaigns. However, in order to more intentionally build naturally supportive communities to "build back better" post-pandemic, more policy uptake is needed. Below are policy options for provincial and federal government to help build more supportive connections and communities.

Policy options for provincial government

- Policy leaders at all levels of government enable the implementation of natural supports approaches.
- Embed the concept and language of natural supports in overarching Government of Alberta policy frameworks/business plans.
- Develop measures, i.e., outcomes and indicators (see box below for examples),[30] to guide and support communities in the development of strategies to advance natural supports. This should include specific measures for children, youth, and their families.
- Develop policy(s) to reduce the risks and barriers to service delivery and charitable organizations that engage with champions

and volunteers to augment funded staff in programs that build natural supports.
- Include requirements for natural supports advancement across the lifespan and specify funding for community champions, such as engagement coordinators and community connectors, in Family and Community Support Services funding.
- Develop a culturally specific strategy for enhancing natural supports in Indigenous communities consistent with each community's ways of knowing.
- Develop strategies for enhancing natural supports that are inclusive with respect to age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, and language abilities.

Policy options for federal government

- Policy leaders at all levels of government enable the implementation of natural supports approaches.
- Embed natural supports language and concepts in relevant Public Health Agency of Canada policy documents.

- Encourage applicants on future grants opportunities targeted at building naturally supportive communities, and when appropriate, include natural supports outcomes and indicators (see box below for

[28] City of Calgary. *A community of connections: Calgary Mental Health and Addiction Community Strategy and Action Plan 2021-2023.* Calgary, Alberta; 2021.

[29] Boys and Girls Clubs Big Brothers Big Sisters of Edmonton and Area. *Boys and Girls Clubs Big Brothers Big Sisters: Strategic directions 2019-2021.* Edmonton, Alberta; 2018.

[30] Tough S, Reynolds N, Walsh J-L, Agius M. *Connections First: Key natural supports indicators.* Calgary, AB, Canada: Connections First Max Bell Foundation & Burns Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship; 2020.

examples)[31] in reporting and/or evaluation requirements.

- Promote and endorse campaigns to build naturally supportive communities by providing people with easy, brief opportunities to engage through actions, such as social snacking.

Examples of natural supports indicators

- Approaches to engaging community residents in 'building natural supports' can be identified.
- Allocation of useable space to encourage informal connections between residents, families, children, and youth can be identified.
- Coordinators responsible for developing engagement approaches are supported, funded and resourced.
- Strategies to connect with those who are potentially vulnerable, isolated and/or newcomers can be identified.

How will we know when we get to naturally supportive communities?

When:[32]

- All children, youth and families in the community feel they belong, are socially connected and have at least one link to relevant and respectful supports.
- The community has an embedded value of natural supports evident in planning of events, activities, and programs.
- Community leadership and residents broadly understand the concept of natural supports, and how having a more naturally supportive community can help residents build connections, sense of belonging and safety, and well-being.
- Children and youth have an adult in their neighbourhood who cares about them, believes they will be successful, and listens to them when they have something to say.

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[31] Op. cit. 30.
[32] Reynolds N, Tough S, Walsh J-L, Agius M. *A guide to building naturally supportive communities.* Calgary, Alberta: Connections First: Max Bell Foundation and Burns Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship; 2020.

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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