

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH PROGRAM

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Aboriginal Children & Youth: Guidance for New Approaches and Services

A RESEARCH SUMMARY FROM THE Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program

Our Research Reviews

In 2003, the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) made a long-term commitment to improving the mental health of children and youth in the province. The resulting five-year *Child and Youth Mental Health Plan* for BC takes a coordinated approach to strengthening prevention and treatment services, monitoring outcomes for children's mental health and enhancing public accountability for programs and services.

Our program supports MCFD's *Plan* by reviewing the best available research evidence on effective strategies for preventing and treating a variety of children's mental health problems, and by making recommendations to inform the development of related policies and services. Our full report on *Aboriginal Children & Youth: Guidance for New Approaches and Services*, plus an *Annotated Bibliography* that accompanies the report, is available at: www.childmentalhealth.ubc.ca

If You Have Concerns About Your Child or Youth

The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) provides a wide range of direct clinical services and targeted community supports for children and youth at-risk or dealing with mental health problems, and for their families.

For more information, please contact your local MCFD office (listed in the Blue or Government Pages of the phone book) or visit: http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/help.htm

To learn more about BC's *Child & Youth Mental Health Plan*, please visit: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health

Understanding Mental Health & Well-Being in Aboriginal Youth

Aboriginal concepts of mental health and illness differ from Western definitions as exemplified by the disciplines of psychology, social work and psychiatry. These disciplines tend to focus on pathology, dysfunction or coping behaviours rooted in the individual person. By contrast, Aboriginal health is relational; strength and security are derived from family and community. In Aboriginal cultures, the concept of "wholeness" relates as often to the totality of creation as to the state of the individual.

Community is a value shared by Aboriginal peoples and is the spirit that holds families together. For its members, the healthy community offers physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual resources. However, communities burdened with health, social, emotional and other issues

often also face serious challenges in gathering the material or human resources needed to address these difficulties.

Efforts to promote child and youth mental health and well-being must be considered within this broader, cultural reality. That is why assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of an Aboriginal child or youth include both an inventory of their sources of stress and their coping abilities, and a description of the external (family and community) support systems available and accessible to them.

Restoring family wellness and strengthening Aboriginal communities over the long-term requires an understanding of the determinants of health and a long-term requires commitment to building capacity within communities.

Aboriginal Children & Youth: Guidance for New Approaches and Services

Review Results

The mental health and well-being of Aboriginal children and youth depends on healthy families and communities.

Efforts to promote healing and wellness in Aboriginal communities must incorporate the Aboriginal worldview and consider traditional approaches to support and healing.

Key to achieving better futures for Aboriginal children and youth are strategies that recognize the broad determinants of health, promote local leadership and mentoring, and build capacity in families and communities.

Our report relies on two sources of knowledge: published and unpublished literature from 1993-2003, and informal interviews with key informants from a number of First Nations communities in BC.

Of 375 articles retrieved, 49 met our criteria for inclusion. These are summarized in an *Annotated*

Bibliography that accompanies the report. Information from 10 key informants—selected due to their extensive experience and commitment to improving quality of life for families—was summarized and integrated with findings from the literature reviews.

Recommendations from the Research

- *Recognize the contributions of culturally relevant determinants of health.*
Strategies are needed to identify determinants of personal and family health to increase the number of Aboriginal community members who enjoy whole health.
- *Focus on implementing community-level interventions.*
Findings suggest programs that involve families, schools, local governments and communities hold greater promise than individual, clinic-based interventions.
- *Promote local leadership and develop high-quality training.*
Implementing health promotion and prevention programs requires effective leadership as well as skills in community development, partnership – building and collaboration.
- *Provide mentoring and support.*
Develop a mechanism to support community leaders and workers, and create opportunities for them to share experiences and solve problems.
- *Foster links within and between communities.*
It may be important to build links with, and draw support from, appropriate networks outside of the community.
- *Support ongoing capacity building.*
Help communities to interpret research evidence and engage in evaluation of programs, with the goal of improving practices locally.

About Us

The Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program is located within the Department of Psychiatry at UBC. We provide research, education and policy consultation services to build a broad public health strategy to improve the mental health and well-being of children and youth in British Columbia and Canada.

A Public Health Approach to Improving Mental Health for Children and Youth

