



**Policy Framework:
Mental Health for
Alberta's Children
and Youth**

Interim Report

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A Policy Framework: Mental Health for Alberta's Children and Youth

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A Policy Framework: Mental Health for Alberta's Children and Youth

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This document outlines a provincial policy framework to optimize the mental health of Alberta's children and youth. It has been prepared by the Children's Mental Health Framework Steering Committee (FSC) within the context of the Alberta Children's and Youth Initiative (ACYI). It will serve as the foundation for strategic planning, investment priorities, business and implementation planning¹ and will link with and complement other ACYI activities.

The policy framework has been designed to support a common approach for optimizing the mental health of Alberta's children and youth. It is informed by and builds upon reports prepared about children's mental health in Alberta.²

THE FRAMEWORK

The framework to optimize the mental health of Alberta's children and youth is comprised of a guiding vision, belief and principles, goals, a conceptual model, intended outcomes, and strategic elements.

The Vision

Alberta's children and youth will have optimal mental health.

This vision complements and supports the Alberta Government's commitment that "Our children will be well cared-for, safe, successful at learning and healthy."³

Beliefs and Principles

The framework is based on the following beliefs and principles.

Beliefs

- Mental health is more than the absence of mental health disorders or freedom from psychiatric symptoms.
- Children, youth and families have strengths and potential.
- Children and youth have unique mental health needs that are different from those of adults.
- Children and youth benefit when they are involved with positive role models.
- The determinants of health⁴ influence the optimal development of children, youth, families and communities.

- Individuals, families, community service providers and governments share responsibility and accountability for achieving optimal mental health.
- The severity and duration of mental health problems are reduced through early identification and intervention.
- Some children and youth are seriously impaired by mental health problems and disorders.
- Children, youth and their families who have mental health disorders or mental health problems should have access to timely and appropriate support and treatment.

Principles

- The mental health of children and youth will be positively affected in environments where they are safe, well nourished, stimulated, loved and have opportunities to learn and play.
- Respect for autonomy, dignity, culture, spirituality, and diversity of all children, youth and their families shall be demonstrated.
- There is a need for programs and services specifically designed for children and youth to optimize their mental health.
- There is a need for services to be available, accessible and reflect community requirements.
- Optimal mental health for children and youth will be achieved through effective collaborative action based on common goals.
- Children, youth and their families will have opportunities to influence the processes that impact their mental health.

Conceptual Model

Critical components of this policy framework are the definitions of mental health, mental health problems and mental disorders.

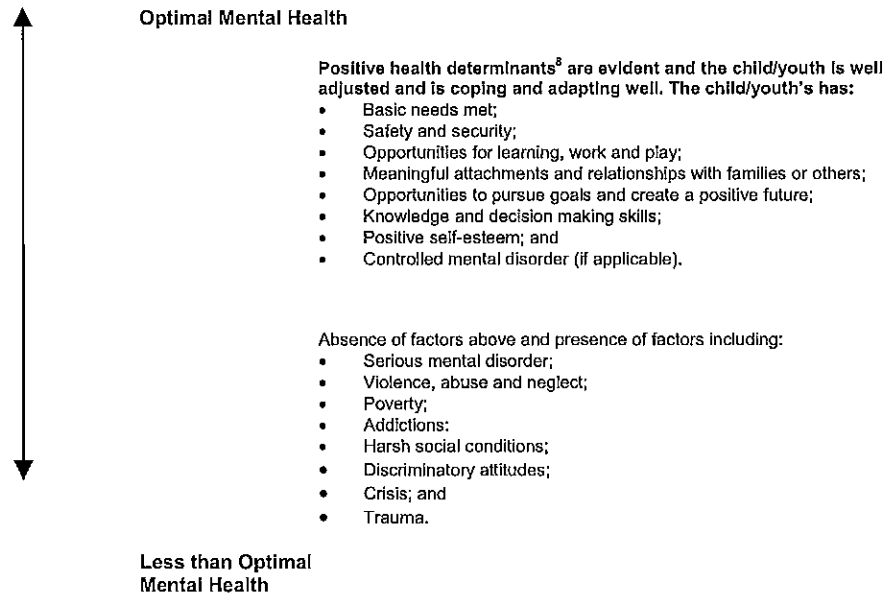
“Mental health is the capacity of the individual, the group and the environment to interact with one another in ways that promote subjective well-being, the optimal development and use of mental abilities (cognitive, affective and relational), the achievement of individual and collective goals consistent with justice and the attainment and preservation of fundamental equality.”⁵

“A mental health problem ...is a disruption in the interactions between the individual, the group and the environment. Such a disruption may result from factors within the individual, including physical or mental illness, or inadequate coping skills. It may also spring from external causes, such as the existence of harsh environmental factors, unjust social structures, or tensions within the family or community.”⁶

“A mental disorder [is a] recognized medically diagnosable illness that results in a significant impairment of an individual’s cognitive, affective and relational abilities.”⁷

The relationships between mental health, mental health problems and mental disorders are graphically presented below.

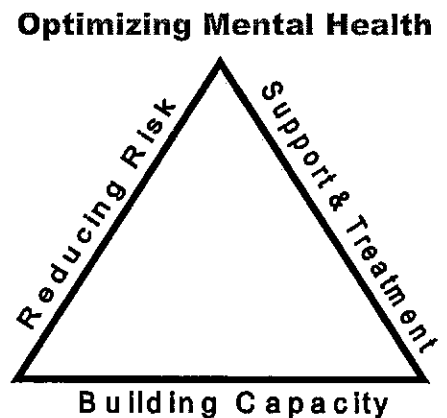
Mental Health Continuum



The Model

Mental health for Alberta's children, youth and their families will be achieved through:

- Building capacity to enhance/increase factors that promote mental health and well-being;
- Removing or reducing risks to well-being and mental health; and
- Providing support and treatment.



The three components of the model apply to individuals, families, communities and systems.

Building Capacity

Building capacity means to identify, maintain and strengthen the factors that promote mental health and well-being. Capacity building is needed at many levels: governments (including First Nations and Metis Settlements), communities (including Metis communities), families and individuals. It can involve a range of activities.

Reducing Risk

Reducing risk means optimizing mental health by decreasing factors that negatively impact well-being. These factors may include physical illness, poverty, abuse or chronic neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, crisis or trauma, addictions, unjust or harsh social conditions, discriminatory attitudes and other obstacles. Factors that may result in a mental health problem for one youth may not in another because of varying coping and adaptive capacities.

Providing Support and Treatment

Support and treatment includes a range of approaches, programs and services needed to optimize mental health of children and youth with mental health disorders and problems. A mental disorder may be an obstacle to achieving mental health. However, even if serious and chronic, mental disorders are one of many factors that influence mental health – a person with a controlled mental disorder may exhibit good mental health.

Strategic Directions

Three major strategic directions flow from the conceptual model.

Building Capacity to Foster Optimal Mental Health

Children, youth, families and communities will benefit from approaches, programs and services that enhance their capacity to experience good mental health and well-being.

Reducing Risks to Optimal Mental Health

Children, youth, families and communities will benefit from approaches, programs and services that eliminate or reduce risk factors associated with mental health problems.

Providing Support and Treatment for Children, Youth and their Families

Children and youth, who have mental health disorders or mental health problems, and their families, will benefit from access to appropriate support and treatment.

Expected Outcomes

Outcomes Associated with Building Capacity to Foster Optimal Mental Health

- Increase the abilities of individuals, families, communities, and governments to recognize and contribute to the mental health of children and youth.
- Increase the responsiveness of the infrastructure, (e.g., policy, protocols, evaluation, best practices, collaboration, co-location of services, human resource strategies, cross-training, information technology), to meet the evolving needs of children, youth and families.
- Increase Albertans' knowledge about the determinants of health and their own role in affecting mental health.
- Increase the capacity (e.g., human and fiscal resources, time, knowledge of process) of partners and stakeholders to collaborate effectively.
- Increase awareness of the factors that build and sustain mental wellness among service providers.

Outcomes Associated with Reducing and Minimizing Risks to Optimal Mental Health

- Increase prevention and early intervention strategies for children, youth, families and communities.
- Decrease the risk factors that contribute to mental health problems in children, youth and their families.
- Increase the knowledge and ability of individuals associated with children and youth to identify and connect those at risk for mental health problems to appropriate resources.
- Increase the awareness of individuals, families and caregivers about the warning signs of crisis, escalation of crisis and the importance of timely intervention, for children and youth.

Outcomes Associated with Treatment and Support for Mental Health Problems

- Increase the early identification and connection to appropriate resources of children and youth at risk for mental health problems.
- Increase awareness of and access to basic services⁹ in order to enable children, youth and their family to obtain services within or close to their own community.
- Ensure specialized services¹⁰ are available in strategic locations throughout the province.
- Enhance the range and accessibility of community supports and services (e.g., respite, interim services, transitional supports) for children, youth and their caregivers.

Activities to Support the Strategic Directions

The following interrelated activities collectively support the strategic directions of capacity building, risk reduction, and support/treatment:

- Health Promotion
- Prevention
- Early Identification
- Crisis Intervention and Stabilization
- Treatment Interventions
 - Basic Services
 - Specialized Services
- Community Supports
- Collaboration Supports

Health Promotion

Health promotion includes mental health promotion. It addresses health determinants with the objective of building capacity among children and youth to cope and function well. Health promotion focuses on enhancing factors to protect children and youth against mental health problems or disorders and other health issues.

Specific areas that are the domain of health promotion within this framework will include addressing health determinants to promote mental health. Efforts will include strategies to reduce the stigma associated with mental health disorders and problems, and promoting mental health awareness and mental wellness.

Prevention

Prevention includes activities aimed at children and youth, families, groups and communities in the general population by reducing the impact of risk factors and enhancing protective factors for mental disorders or mental health problems.

Early Identification

Early identification, also called early intervention, includes activities that focus on early detection and screening of children and youth with mental health issues. Depending upon the results of the screen, a child or youth is assessed to determine their unique needs and are connected to the appropriate resources.

Crisis Intervention and Stabilization

Crisis intervention is the timely intervention required to address the special immediate needs of a child or youth who is in intensive emotional distress or in an intensive emotionally disruptive situation.

Stabilization includes activities targeted at restoring the manner in which a child or youth functions after an emotionally disruptive situation.

Treatment Intervention

Treatment intervention is comprised of basic and specialized services provided to children and youth.

Basic services include referral, assessment and intervention for children and youth who have mental disorders or mental health problems that have affected how they function in major areas of their lives.

Specialized services are specially adapted interventions for children and youth who have mental disorders or mental health problems that have resulted in a significant level of disability and/or have severely affected functioning in the major areas of their lives.

Community Supports

Community supports within this framework include activities that provide for and support basic needs from a mental health perspective. Basic needs includes:

- Secure stable living environment;
- Physical and emotional safety;
- Relevant social opportunities;
- Basic social stimulation and recreation;
- Meaningful attachments/relationships; and
- Meaningful activities, i.e., employment, education, leisure, and economic security.

The range of and need for community supports will vary depending upon the needs of the child or youth and the characteristics of the community in which they live with their family or caregivers.

Collaboration Supports

Collaboration supports within this framework include approaches and strategies to enable stakeholders to work together effectively to address the needs of children, youth and their families. Transitions between services to address the mental health needs of children and youth must be smooth and barrier-free.

Many ministries, various levels of government, agencies and service providers are instrumental in creating environments, support and treatment services associated with optimizing mental health for children and youth. Responsibility for optimizing mental health is shared among many, though the manner in which some stakeholders influence mental health may not appear obvious.

FRAMEWORK IMPLICATIONS

The Policy Framework: Mental Health for Alberta's Children and Youth broadens accountability for mental health for children and youth to many government and community stakeholders. It forms the foundation for future strategic planning, investment priorities, and business planning processes to optimize the mental health of children and youth and calls upon stakeholders to concentrate their efforts in three strategic areas:

- Building Capacity to Foster Optimal Mental Health
- Reducing Risks to Optimal Mental Health
- Providing Support and Treatment for Children, Youth and their Families

ENDNOTES

¹ These activities will be outlined in future documents.

² Key reports considered during the preparation of this document are listed in Appendix B. Though this document has been shaped by previous reports, it does not attempt to reiterate their contents.

³ Vision statement for the Alberta Children's Initiative as noted in the "The Alberta Children's Initiative: An Agenda for Joint Action." Page 3, slightly modified to include, "...and youth..." The Alberta Children's Initiative has been renamed the Alberta Children's and Youth Initiative and emphasis is on both children *and youth*.

⁴ Details about health determinants are outlined in Appendix C. A Glossary of Terms is presented in Appendix D.

⁵ "Mental Health for Canadians: Striking a Balance." Health and Welfare Canada, 1988, page 7.

⁶ Ibid, page 8.

⁷ Ibid, Page 8.

⁸ The points presented are some of the major factors associated with mental health but do not constitute an exhaustive, comprehensive list.

⁹ Definitions provided in section on Strategic Elements.

¹⁰ Ibid.