



Children's Mental Health Ontario  
Santé mentale pour enfants Ontario

**Children's Mental Health Ontario**

**Submission to Dr. Charles Pascal, Early Learning Advisor**

**February 2009**

## **About Children's Mental Health Ontario**

Children's Mental Health Ontario is the primary catalyst in both strengthening Ontario's child and youth mental health agencies and enhancing mental health services for children, youth and their families in Ontario. Our mission is to champion the right of every child and youth in Ontario to mental health and well-being.

Our membership includes more than 90 community-based children's mental health centres that are the backbone of Ontario's mental health system for children and youth. These agencies provide support to families, and treatment to young people who present with a range of social, emotional and behavioural problems including: bullying, violence, defiance, ADHD, eating disorders, depression, self-harm, anxiety and addictions. Many of these children and youth experience significant impairment in functioning within their families, schools and communities, and may also be involved with child welfare or the youth justice system.

## **Introduction**

We are pleased to have the opportunity to put forward recommendations to the Early Learning Advisor on the implementation of full day learning for four and five year olds in Ontario. Based on the extensive research available, much of it undertaken by Dr. Fraser Mustard, we know that investments in early learning pay off dramatically in the long term.

## **Assumptions**

The Early Learning Advisor has made a series of assumptions to frame the feedback that he will be receiving as the consultation process moves forward. Children's Mental Health Ontario agrees with these assumptions which include:

- All decisions regarding the development of an effective program for early learning should flow from what is in the best interests of children and their families.
- Early child development sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health.
- Partnerships with families and communities strengthen the ability of early childhood programs to meet the needs of young children.
- Respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion are critical for honoring children's rights, optimal development, learning and contributing to a more inclusive society.
- A planned curriculum and skilled professionals support a balance of learning-based play and academic skill preparation.
- An integrated, well managed system of early learning can achieve good results.

These assumptions will be included in recommendations throughout the document.

## Poverty

We know that some of Ontario's children face unique challenges as they prepare to learn in a full day setting. Many factors influence a child's ability to learn, including: poverty; if they and their parents are new to Canada; if their parents suffer from mental health problems, or abuse drugs or alcohol, or if they are the result of early parenthood. Some of these issues are being examined independently by the province, most particularly the issue of poverty.

Poverty significantly influences a child's readiness to learn, and potential mental health issues, and should be considered in the work of the Early Learning Advisor. According to data from the first phase of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, children living in families – where household income is below 75% of Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off – have higher rates of behaviour problems, and repeat grades in school more often than children living in poverty but in households with higher incomes (Offord & Lipman, 1996). The Ontario Child Health Study reported similar results. Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy report, *"Breaking the Cycle,"* recently concluded that "there is a strong association between poverty and child and youth mental health problems. The odds of a child or youth from a family living in poverty having a mental health problem are three times that of a child from a family that is not living in poverty."

We will continue to encourage Minister Matthews, Chair of the Cabinet Committee on Poverty, to invest in children's mental health in an effort to manage the effects of poverty. We recommend that the Early Learning Advisor's recommendations aim to break down the silos of programs across government that will help children prepare to learn.

## Mental Health and Schools

A survey of CMHO member agencies confirmed that all of them have a presence in the schools, however the formality of these relationships varies across the province; from casual referrals to programs delivered by agencies directly in the schools.

Start Right Social Skills is a school-based prevention program of The Child Development Institute (CDI) in Toronto. CDI delivers the program for junior and senior kindergarten children who are not adjusting well to the everyday requirements of regular classrooms. The program has strong support of the school community, and broad participation from teachers who determine which children take part in the program. Extensive evaluation of this program indicates that it has been very successful in attaining its short, intermediate and long term outcomes. Some of these include: new social skills, new problem solving skills, feeling less helpless, positive interaction with peers, and progress in curriculum. The long term outcomes for this program are that children will be able to adapt more readily to Grade 1 routines and expectations and ultimately, will have the opportunity to succeed in school.

It should be noted that the program has been very successful and continues to be evaluated and expanded. Grants from the Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO provide funding for the evaluation component. We would encourage the Early Learning Advisor to consider the value of the myriad of successful programs that exist across the province, including the Start Right Social Skills Program at Child Development Institute. This program fits the assumption of the Early Learning Advisor that respect for diversity, equity and inclusion are critical for honouring children's rights, optimal development learning and contributing to a more inclusive society.

The FAIR START program in Thunder Bay, which began in 1996, has evolved to now include early screening for all children registering for junior kindergarten. Partners in this program include: The Lakehead District School Board, Catholic School Board, Thunder Bay District Health Unit, Communities Together for Children, Lakehead Regional Family Centre, Children's Centre Thunder Bay, the George Jeffrey Children's Treatment Centre, Thunder Bay Police Association, City of Thunder Bay, volunteers and fundraisers. Together with a Prescreening Booklet completed by parents, FAIR START early screening helps identify possible concerns in several different areas of child development that may impact their ability to learn - including those related to mental health.

The FAIR START program is a good example of the community coming together to ensure that children have the support they need to enter school ready to learn. This program also encompasses the assumption made by the Early Learning Advisor that partnerships with families and communities strengthen the ability of early childhood programs to meet the needs of young children.

## **Physical and Mental Health**

The 2008-2009 Results Based Plan of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services sheds light on the myriad of programs available to support the physical health and development of infants from the pre-natal stage to school age. At a glance, these include:

- Healthy Babies Healthy Children
- Child Care subsidies
- Special Needs Resourcing
- Best Start Demonstration Communities
- Infant Development Program
- Preschool Speech and Language Program
- Infant Hearing Program
- Blind-Low Vision Early Intervention Program
- Student Nutrition
- Ontario Early Years Centres
- Pre- and Post-Natal Nurse Practitioner Program

Each of these programs is tremendously beneficial to children and their families, and together, they account for strong investments by the province in ensuring a healthy start in life for its citizens. The programs are also complementary, and support all children through each age and stage towards the school environment. However, apart from services for children diagnosed with autism, there are no provincially funded and mandated programs that provide early identification and/or prevention of mental health issues for children. We recommend that the Early Learning Advisor support the implementation of "*A Shared Responsibility*", the policy framework for child and youth mental health which promises "an increased focus on mental health promotion, illness prevention, early identification and early intervention" (page 13). We also recommend that the Early Learning Advisor address the lack of mental health supports for children early in life, and the absence of provincially funded and mandated prevention and early intervention programs.

## Roots of Youth Violence

The Hon. Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling in their recent report to the Premier on youth violence, placed mental health supports as the sole recommendation with a specific dollar value investment (\$200 million) and timeline for implementation. They stated that “children’s mental health affects many aspects of the roots: the stability of families and the ability of parents to work and parent, how youth develop with their peers, how they do in school, how they interact with the justice system and their life chances overall. We believe that one or more associations with expertise in youth mental health should be retained immediately to prepare a plan for universal, community-based access to mental health services for children and youth for the earliest possible implementation.” (page 380)

After extensive consultation, former Chief Justice McMurtry and Dr. Curling concluded that mental health is key to ensuring children and youth are able to function in their family setting, learn in a school setting, avoid conflict with the law and position themselves to grow and prosper. We recommend that the Early Learning Advisor endorse the commitment to universal, community-based mental health services found in the Roots of Youth Violence Report.

## Wait Lists

For children suffering with a mental health issue, their ability to receive prompt treatment is hampered by lengthy wait times across the province. As the Auditor General indicated in his most recent report, “the potential consequences of not meeting a child’s mental health needs include poor academic achievement, conflict with the law, substance abuse, and inability to live independently or hold a job. Many of these problems continue into adulthood and often affect the next generation.”

The Brief Child and Family Phone Interview (BCFPI) is a screening tool that is used during intake by Child and Youth Mental Health Centres, and is mandated by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to determine service needs. The most recent BCFPI data indicate a wait time of 65 days on average for an assessment which is the first step in providing treatment or support services.

In specific areas of the province, the situation is even more dire: Areas that are particularly hard hit by the economic downturn have reported a dramatic increase in demand for service. For example, Appendix A demonstrates that in Windsor the demand has increased by 50% over the past 12 months. As families struggle with the stress associated with job loss and financial hardship, their kids are being negatively affected: These children need support and treatment for children’s mental health issues before they worsen.

The Brief Child and Family Phone Interview screens children age six and up, but does not determine the needs for children from 0 – 5; nor is there any other government-supported tool to screen for mental health problems in very young children. This highlights the significant gap in service for young children who may be struggling, or whose parents are concerned that there is something wrong with their child. As Sylvia Naumovski, president of Parents for Children’s Mental Health recently stated, “I knew there was something wrong with my child from a very early age – and I now tell parents to trust their gut”. Again, we recommend that the Early Learning Advisor address the need for government-funded and mandated early identification programs.

## **Conclusion**

Children's Mental Health Ontario appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the Early Learning Advisor and to inform his work. Children's mental health supports and services are critical for student success from the earliest age of school involvement. There is a significant gap in early identification, prevention and early intervention programs for children, and the economic downturn has made the situation much worse. We recommend that the Early Learning Advisor include mental health supports and services for young children as the highest priority in his report.