



Canadian Council of
Child and Youth Advocates



Conseil Canadien des Défenseurs
des Enfants et des Jeunes

MEDIA STATEMENT **May 7, 2021**

Children's advocates call for significant mental health planning and investment for young people now and after pandemic on National Child and Youth Mental Health Day

SASKATOON – COVID-19 is having major mental health consequences for children and youth across Canada and will have a lasting – and potentially devastating impact - if governments do not act now, say members of the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (CCCYA).

“This pandemic is more than a physical health crisis. What we are now seeing is that, for child and youth mental health, COVID-19 is a critical situation in the making,” said CCCYA President and Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth, Dr. Lisa Broda. “This is alarming as pre-pandemic public investment in mental health was already painfully inadequate, so without significant and thoughtful investment now and in the future by governments at all levels in all provinces and territories, we are staring down a catastrophe.”

While COVID-19 is impacting the mental health and well-being of children, youth, and families in every area of the nation, each province and territory faces distinct challenges based on the resources and supports that are available and the types of restrictions that have been necessary in their areas. However, research suggests that even if COVID-19 is not directly impacting a community, family or child, the pandemic is raising young people's anxieties and fears no matter where they live.

Across the country, provincial and territorial children's advocates are seeing similar themes related to mounting pressures on young people connected to the pandemic and markedly insufficient mental health services to support them. The CCCYA has long advocated the imperative to address the gaps, fragmentation, lack of coordination and need for a more robust array of services and supports, including supportive housing, substance use services and transitional supports. The pandemic increases the urgency for these deficiencies to be rectified.

“Young people who were struggling before the pandemic are barely coping now, and in some cases, have given up,” said Newfoundland and Labrador's Child and Youth Advocate Jackie Lake-Kavanagh. “Children in families where incomes have been lost, where poverty is their reality, or where family violence may be a factor are enduring enormous stress, and that is bearing out in behaviour issues, problems with school, disrupted sleep and suicidal ideation. It's also worth noting that when parents are stressed, children are, too. So, supporting child and youth mental health means supporting entire families.”

Over the course of the pandemic, young people have had to figure out new ways of learning and connecting. In many areas of the country, children and

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their families have been dealing with school closures and re-openings, a shift to online learning that many experienced as a seismic event, and the inability to see their friends, participate in extracurricular activities or even see their family members which has led to social isolation, exacerbating the problem.

Literature shows that young people are now spending more time online and on social media, which, in some cases, has resulted in increased bullying and heightened risk of exploitation.

Racism is also intensifying the disproportionate impact on some children. Anti-Asian racism has been a major issue, particularly, and there are long-standing racism concerns in the health care system which may disproportionately impact Indigenous children and families. In the case of Indigenous youth, the mental health services that do exist are often not culturally appropriate.

First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Urban Indigenous youth are also dealing with ongoing legacies of colonialism which have created pre-existing adversities. These include socioeconomic disadvantages such as overcrowded, unsafe housing, lack of access to clean water and extreme food insecurity – conditions that are already known to put children's mental and physical health at risk. The added impact of the pandemic is magnifying those conditions.

Other specific groups are experiencing amplified challenges. For young people in care, transitioning to adulthood has long been a frightening precipice; now, during the pandemic, it's even more alarming. While some governments have put emergency measures into place, much more needs to be done to support these young people to address the mental health issues they are experiencing.

For those who use substances – many of whom have co-occurring mental health challenges – COVID-19 has ushered in new, potentially fatal dangers due to a toxic drug supply and restrictions on gatherings that mean more people are using alone. Prior to the pandemic, overdose numbers in many areas of the country were declining, particularly in B.C. and Alberta, but that trend was reversed in 2020, and continues in 2021. Young people, sadly, are not exempt.

The mental health stresses for children and youth with special needs are also unique and profound. Manitoba's recent report, *Bridging the Gaps: Achieving Substantive Equality for Children and Youth with Special Needs*, along with British Columbia's December report *Left Out: Children and Youth with Special Needs in the Pandemic*, showed that services for children and youth with special needs were sorely lacking prior to the pandemic. The arrival of COVID-19 has significantly intensified pre-existing issues with access to services and respite care, adding on new layers of difficulty, resulting in children and youth in crisis and families who are at the breaking point.

What the advocates are seeing in their offices is supported by external research. A November study conducted by Dr. Charlotte Waddell at Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Child Health Policy Centre, *COVID-19 and the Impact on Children's Mental Health*, released by B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth, clearly showed that, based on past pandemics, we can anticipate dramatic increases in the number of children and youth experiencing mental health challenges.

"This report provided compelling evidence that governments must invest in already under-funded child and youth mental health services to mitigate major increases in mental health problems that are clearly emerging for young people as a result of the pandemic," said Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth, B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth. "Many of the mental health challenges children experience are preventable and all are treatable. Before the pandemic, there were long wait lists across Canada for mental health services and, over the last year, those wait lists have only increased. We need to make sure that governments are committed to mental wellness for young people and are prepared to provide sufficient resources to back up that commitment."

Several other research studies have reached the same or similar conclusions. For example, the University of British Columbia's *Child and Youth Mental Health during a Pandemic* study found that two-thirds of children and youth in B.C. are struggling with mental health issues. A Health Canada study showed that key populations living with vulnerabilities are being left behind and noted that the most significant impacts of COVID-19 on mental health are likely to be felt after the pandemic. The Canadian Paediatric Society has highlighted specific challenges for First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Urban Indigenous young people. Research from UBC's School of Nursing on children with medical complexities found a vast majority of parents indicated that their mental health was worse than a year previously. And research from McMaster University's Dr. Magdalena Janus found parental mental health deteriorated rapidly when schools closed – stress that has immediate impacts on children and youth.

Going forward, CCCYA members will be conducting further research in this area. For example, SFU's Dr. Waddell is working with B.C.'s Representative to examine the impacts of COVID-19 on mental health for First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Urban Indigenous young people, the intersection of mental health and children and youth with special needs, as well as helpful interventions.

"As distressing as the current situation around mental health is, the good news is that research shows that children do well when their communities have more socioeconomic resources, when they have social supports, and when they receive effective parenting," said Broda. "We need governments to understand that, as we move out of the pandemic, we must prioritize addressing the mental health issues Canadian youth face and are going to face post pandemic. This is the reason why government investment in holistic, culturally appropriate family- and community-based approaches is so critical."

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The Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates is an association of government-appointed children's advocates, ombudsman and representatives in the provinces and territories who hold explicit legislated mandates to protect the rights of children and youth in Canada. Government appoints them as independent officers of the legislatures in their respective jurisdictions.

For more go to www.cccya.ca

Backgrounder Follows

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Background

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