

News Release

For Immediate Release

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Representative calls on government to provide mental health services for children and youth with support needs

VICTORIA – A new research report released today by the Representative for Children and Youth (RCY) in conjunction with the Children's Health Policy Centre (CHPC) at Simon Fraser University provides robust evidence that mental health challenges are much higher for children with neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), and intellectual disabilities (ID). The report is the second in a series of RCY reports on mental health and wellness for distinct populations of children and youth.

"There is a clear opportunity with government's 'reset' of the framework for children and youth with support needs [CYSN] to ensure that children are getting the services they need," said Representative Jennifer Charlesworth. "The CHPC's report was undertaken to determine how big an issue mental health challenges are for these young people, and what the research tells us about what can be done. It turns out that, not surprisingly, mental health is a huge issue that is going largely unaddressed for far too many of these children and families. With the reset, government has a golden opportunity here – and a duty – to fix it."

In an accompanying report to the CHPC study, *Toward Inclusion: The need to improve access to mental health services for children and youth with neurodevelopmental conditions*, the Representative makes three new recommendations to government, including reiterating a call to fully fund and implement mental health screening, assessment and treatment for children and youth with neurodevelopmental conditions.

Charlesworth also repeats a recommendation from her April 2021 *report Excluded: Increasing Understanding, Support and Inclusion for Children with FASD and their*

Families calling for government to develop a cross-ministry plan to collect demographic data to provide a foundation for policy and program development and service monitoring.

The CHPC report, led by Drs. Christine Schwartz and Charlotte Waddell, examined data showing that five of the most common mental health disorders were dramatically higher for children with neurodevelopmental conditions. For example:

- anxiety disorders were nearly eight times higher for children with ASD
- major depressive disorder was 28 times higher for children with FASD
- attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder was more than double for children with intellectual disabilities.

The findings suggest that mental health disorders are causing a pronounced burden for children with neurodevelopmental conditions, compared with other children.

“We applied rigorous research methods in identifying the added needs that these children and youth have,” said Waddell. “For example, we required studies to conduct detailed mental health assessments.”

Fortunately, the CHPC report found that effective interventions for each of the three populations do exist.

“Cognitive-behavioural therapy is a proven treatment that is relatively easy to deliver so we were not surprised that it showed success, as did parent training,” Waddell said. “We urge the government to make these tested treatments readily available to all children in need — enabling all to flourish.”

“Children and youth with neurodevelopmental conditions, as well as their families, are already dealing with a lot,” Charlesworth said. “This report confirms the extraordinarily high prevalence of mental health disorders in this population of young people, and we urge government to implement a specific plan to improve services. In addition, it will be imperative that services to First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Urban Indigenous children be co-created and implemented with Indigenous rights and title holders and communities.

“I hope and expect that, with its CYSN framework ‘reset,’ government will seize the opportunity to provide the services that are so urgently needed by young people with disabilities.”

The full report is available here: <https://rcybc.ca/reports-and-publications/reports/toward-inclusion-the-need-to-improve-access-to-mental-health-services-for-children-and-youth-with-developmental-conditions/>

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