

Max Bell Foundation & Burns
Memorial Fund Policy Fellowship

CALL TO ACTION

THE OPPORTUNITY OF NATURAL SUPPORTS TO PROMOTE WELL-BEING AND RESILIENCY IN ALBERTA

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FUNDED BY

Max Bell Foundation, and Burns Memorial Fund
Policy Fellowship 2017-2020, Alberta, Canada

December 9, 2020

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The Opportunity of Natural Supports to Promote Well-being and Resiliency in Alberta



Investing in strategies that promote healthy environments and positive experiences through childhood and adolescence enables optimal development, facilitating a skilled and civil society.

This Call to Action reflects contemporary evidence about the value of investments at the community level to mitigate the influence of adversity on child and youth development. It is aligned with Government of Alberta and Not for Profit sector documents, including the Well-being and Resiliency Frameworks (March 2019).¹

This Call to Action is designed for those who are seeking information about Natural Supports, including material to inform strategic planning and evaluation. The Call to Action provides information about the potential of **natural supports and supportive environments** to foster child and youth development and to mitigate the influence of adversity on individual potential.

FRAMING THE CALL

Natural Supports are informal reciprocal relationships and associations that are sustained over a period of time. These relationships are built on trust, dependability, kindness and mutual respect, and involve some form of give-and-take. In other words, they are healthy supportive relationships.

Western society values the concept of maximizing individual potential and numerous theorists have described how this can be achieved.^{1,2,3} Well-being is more likely when children and youth are safe, are physically and emotionally supported, experience connection to community and culture and have opportunities to develop their potential. Stress and adversity are experienced by all children and appropriate stress can assist with the development of resiliency. However, excessive family chaos or dysfunction increases the likelihood that children fail, engage in deviant behavior, leave school and misuse substances. Among vulnerable children and families, **natural supports and naturally supportive environments** can buffer the influence of adversity to reduce the likelihood of poor outcomes. **Natural supports** enable children and families to experience safety, security and belonging. Natural Supports are informal reciprocal relationships and associations that are sustained over a period of time. They consist of close relationships, such as family and friends, and also include broader associations, such as neighbours and mentors. Of particular relevance to this work are Natural Supports in the context of community which would include local businesses, associations and resources. These supports include the people we work with, sports teams we play on, book clubs or drop in events, and people we regularly see such as coffee baristas, hair dressers, bus drivers, and others.

Child Well Being as defined in the Alberta Well Being and Resiliency Framework March 2019, and aligned with other theorists including Maslow, Erikson, Piaget, Bronfenbrenner, Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, and the Centre for Disease Control ACE's Pyramid, etc.

This Call to Action is organized as follows:

- a) describing the context under which development is optimized
- b) current evidence about children, families and natural supports
- c) suggested strategies to enhance natural supports and communities; and
- d) a summary

While development across the life course occurs, of particular interest are the tasks associated with development between the ages of 6 to 16 years. These include the maturation of cognitive skills in logic, inference, perspective taking, and sense of self and personal uniqueness. Through this period personal competencies including purpose, industry and initiative are also established.⁴ Successful acquisition of the skills and tasks associated with middle childhood are foundation to lifelong success in relationship and career, and to the establishment of a civic society.

Children are nurtured in families, communities and by the broader structural and policy environment, consequently, strategies to maximize individual potential, and reduce the influence of threats to development, must be contextualized and must cross jurisdictional boundaries.

Most often, family is the first and primary environment within which children grow and learn. The ability of parents and caring adults to provide adequate and appropriate support varies as a consequence of competency, awareness, skills and resources. Families, and their children, benefit when they are supported by care-givers, community supports/programs and the structural environment because these can augment family skills to enhance development. What is crucial for children and youth is access to sufficient positive supports to optimize development. Across the life course, stage appropriate structural and emotional challenges and stresses are experienced which assist with the development of resiliency. For example, learning how to take a test, make new friends, and fail at an activity. Unfortunately, some children and youth experience excessive tragedy, chaos, dysfunction or poverty which can impede development. Sub-optimal emotional and cognitive development between the ages of 6 and 16 years increases the likelihood of deviant behavior, school dropout, substance misuse and failure to thrive. Fortunately, families are nestled within communities, municipalities and larger structures that can buffer the influence of adversity in the family setting. Of crucial relevance to this work is the role of **natural supports and naturally supportive environments** in buffering the influence of adversity to optimize development across the life course.

HOW COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND NATURAL SUPPORTS CAN ENSURE THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE SUCCEED

The community is uniquely positioned to make decisions appropriate to local needs and interests, and is well positioned to augment public investments in health and well-being.⁵ In alignment with the Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion⁶ and similar documents,⁷ strategies that optimize structural security, safety and belonging enhance the likelihood of individual competency and have high return on investment. **Natural supports** are a mechanism through which individuals experience safety, security and belonging.

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

For the purpose of understanding **natural supports**, there is an opportunity to link evidence from best practices and programs that have been shown to support individual development and configure these into community-based approaches. Of note, one of the challenges of measuring outcomes of successful natural supportive environments, including the remediation of the effects of adversity on development is that ‘nothing happens’. When children and youth are cared for and safe, prepared for school and competent to engage in relationships.... nothing happens. They accomplish school work, make friends, enjoy hobbies, solve problems and are virtually invisible. They don’t appear in the Principal’s office, the Psychiatrist’s office or in a Young Offenders program. They are uncounted. An analogy could be made to immunization - when rates of immunization are high, there are no epidemics or outbreaks - nothing happensⁱⁱ. Consequently, those interested in evaluating the influence of strategies designed to enhance natural supports will need to measure both process and other outcomes potentially associated with global indicators of well-being (see below for examples) recognizing that measurement of a causal association is problematic.ⁱⁱⁱ

CONTEXTUALIZING THE WORK

Strategies are most likely to be successful when they reflect contemporary issues concerning children, youth and families. The current environment includes important barriers that must be addressed if naturally supportive environments are to be created and sustained (see evidence section for more details). In brief, many community organizations do not hold a vision for addressing the needs of children and youth, and action often focuses on facility rental or infrastructure. Many of those who could be influential positive natural supports are unaware of the need, and of their value. For example, the small business owner may be unaware that his actions towards youth can have important influence. Many families struggle to meet financial and other obligations and note that ‘time crunch’ limits ability to participate. Youth and children who may most benefit from the development of natural supports are often already vulnerable and may have fewer skills to engage- including poor self- regulation, anxiety and depression, and/or behaviour problems.

Approaches of the past may be of limited relevance when the social structure of the community is markedly different, and/or when skills for success differ from the past.^{iv} Consequently, consideration of the following may improve the likelihood that investments in activities to enhance natural supports are successful.^v

PERSON

FAMILY

1. 65% of families have both parents in the work force by the time children are 3 years of age.⁸
2. 24% of men and 38% of women in dual-income families report severe ‘time-crunch’ stress. 68% of families in Canada have 2 income earners.⁹
3. 38% of Canadians, 15 years and older, had at least one immediate or extended family member with either a mental health, emotional or substance misuse problem.¹⁰

ⁱⁱ Consequently, program evaluation needs to accommodate measures of engagement, long term program success, measures of well-being, neighbourhood affiliation and outcomes that may be non-traditional. Duration and participation measures may be required to accompany specific outcome measures.

ⁱⁱⁱ Those interested in program evaluation measures may want to refer to the Middle Years Development Instrument, UNICEF, and other reports on children and youth.

^{iv} A supportive epidemiologic and community-based framework to guide action can be simplified to the following: the outcome is a consequence of the intersection between the person, the place and the time. In this example, children and youth are more likely to experience good mental and physical health (outcome) when the natural support has the skills (person), is in a safe and supportive environment (place) and the activity is relevant, barrier free/aligned (time).

^v These data points may be of relevance for those interested in Program Evaluation - can these be altered through natural support strategies - recognizing that a causal conclusion would be difficult because of the multiple factors that contribute to behaviour?

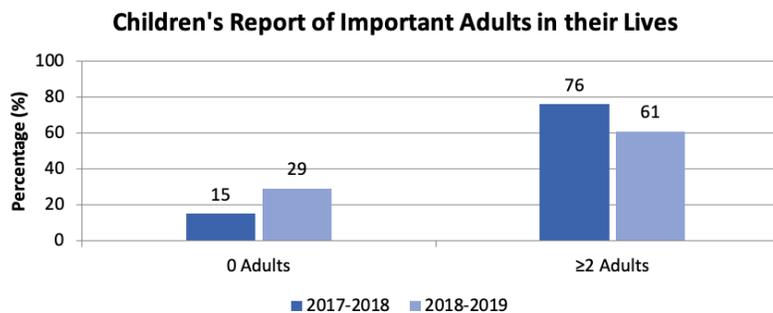
4. 66.2% of parents are satisfied with their life.¹¹ However, only 55% of children and youth report a high level of satisfaction with their lives.¹² Canada ranked 24th out of 27 wealthy countries based on children and youth’s self-reported life satisfaction.¹³

5. Technology is distracting: 62% of parents in Alberta feel negatively distracted by technology and 76% of those same parents, feel as though their technology habits influence those of their children.¹⁴

CHILDREN AND YOUTH

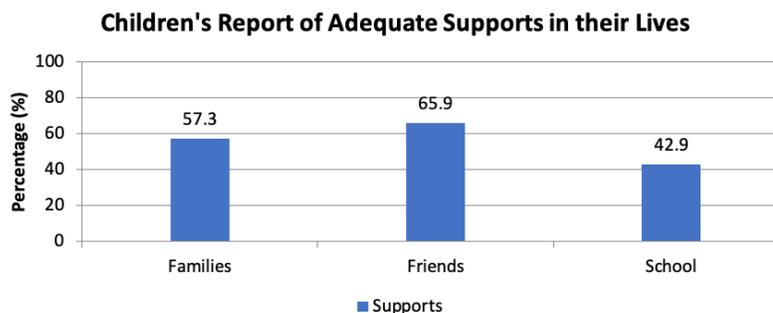
1. When asked, “who are you with after school”, 24% of children in Grade 4 said “by myself”, while only 9% said with a “non-parent adult”.¹⁵

2. The percent of children reporting that they had two or more important adults in their lives decreased from 76% to 61%, while the percent reporting no important adults increased from 15% to 29% in Grade 4 from 2017-2018 to 2018-2019.¹⁵



3. The percent of children thriving on the Well-being Index decreased from 42% to 38% in Grade 4 from 2017-2018 to 2018-2019.¹⁵

4. 57.3% of children receive adequate support from their families, 65.9% from their friends, but only 42.9% say they receive enough support at school.¹²



5. Approximately 25% of children and youth have felt sad, hopeless or lonely for a long period of time.¹²

6. Between the pre-teen years and late adolescence, the percentage of boys who are happy drops from 87% to 63%, in comparison to girls which drops from 93% to 69%.¹⁶

PLACE

1. Transportation ease, population growth, language diversity, and multicultural communities have enabled the development of non-geographic communities of interest. For example, we can participate in the activity of our choice in an urban setting because there is transportation, sufficient population and diversity to ensure those of similar interests can congregate. We have hockey teams, quilting clubs, book clubs. We are no longer obliged to flex our interests to what is within walking distance of our home.

2. Interviews with community leaders revealed that the majority do not see attending to the needs of children and youth as the mandate compared to competing demands to generate revenue through facility rental

3. Population diversity (30%) results in cultural and religious diversity, heterogeneous values and diversity of viewpoints.¹⁷

4. In Alberta, we are in the midst of an economic crisis with up to 25% of office space reported empty. Unemployment rates are elevated, particularly for those aged 30-50 years.

5. Local and global stresses related to globalization and political/economic instability have created an elevated sense of stress and diminished optimism.¹⁸

TIME

1. Although 88% of Canadians are satisfied with their personal safety from crime, and the majority perceive their neighbourhood as safe, other evidence suggests that we perceive our environment as less safe than in the past when it pertains to parental concerns for their child's safety.¹⁹⁻²¹ 57% of neighbourhood champions interviewed (n=13 of 23) discussed the importance of having safe spaces for families and residents, especially for children and youth, and those who are vulnerable.

2. Caring for others has become commodified and professionalized over the past decades.²² For example, we have paid 'friendly visitors' for the aging, and paid child care, paid birthday party entertainment etc. This trend may influence satisfaction with committing to volunteer activities which have become commodified/professionalized.

3. Time challenged citizens may have less confidence in their ability to provide appropriate support to others, particularly in the midst of language or cultural diversity and recognizing that there are 'trained' providers with specific skills. We may doubt our own ability to provide support and turn to grief counsellors, lactation consultants, sleep coaches, etc.²²

4. Numerous media reports of abuse towards children from those in places of positional power (e.g. coaches) has increased the reluctance of some community members to 'get involved'.

5. Technology has enabled access to information, and facilitates congregation of those with similar interests through social media. Technology and social media can facilitate engagement, however, can also be harmful. Approximately 20% of youth have experienced cyberbullying and/or cyberstalking.²³

6. Public Sector Scope: Public sector investments in health, education, social programs have improved wellness, and have also deferred responsibility away from individual citizens and communities towards government.²⁴ In the natural support arena, this is particularly relevant because communities may be unclear of their role in providing social support for vulnerable families.

7. Public Sector Supports: Many supports for vulnerable families have become program based and operationalized through government programs. This has resulted in the ‘anonymizing’ of those who require supports. While providing aid to families, this approach to support may not escalate social and emotional development of the family because there is a lack of connection, and no reciprocity. Reciprocity in relationship has been described as key for the development of self-efficacy and self-esteem, and for the upward momentum of individuals in vulnerable circumstances.²⁴

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT SAFE AND HEALTHY CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THROUGH NATURAL SUPPORTS

Natural Supports are informal reciprocal connections that consist of close relationships, such as family and friends, and broader associations, such as neighbours and mentors.¹

Natural supports elevate the well-being of another through relationship. The relationship has a level of reciprocity, and could include skill development, shared problem solving and support. The contemporary opportunity is to increase/expand the environments that would facilitate the development of natural supports, particularly for youth and children. In essence ‘make it easy for children, youth and families to do the right thing’. Enhancing the opportunity for natural supports may diminish the influence of adversity on child and youth well-being through numerous avenues including enhancement of life skills, alternative role models, relationship skills etc. Well known programmatic approaches include mentoring, participation in group events such as Guides, Scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters, sports and recreation. In the former examples the relationship between the ‘adult’ and the ‘child or youth’ is formalized and structured. The current opportunity is to determine how natural supports, and naturally supportive environments can be developed in communities in novel, informal, less programmatic approach. This upstream primary prevention approach would be inclusive, and potentially engage those most vulnerable, but least likely to participate in structured programs.

Evidence suggests the following be considered:

1. SAFETY

- a. Strategies to share information about neighbourhood safety are required.
- b. Strategies to enhance the development of trusted relationships will increase participation in neighbourhood activities.

2. ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS ²⁵

- a. The scope of practice for members of Community Association boards must include engagement. Evidence suggests that many associations are primarily focused on facility

rental/revenue and maintenance.

b. Community leaders/organizations should prioritize and expand their role in facilitating the development of naturally supportive relationships through access to space, equipment, etc. These efforts could be quantifiable in a program evaluation. The role of the 'friendly community' could be prioritized over 'profit' or 'maintenance'.

c. Contemporary society with high work place participation means that volunteer capacity can be challenging and consideration of rewards/compensation for community leadership should be considered.

d. Consider novel incentives in exchange for engagement, both at the community and individual level. For example, volunteer hours could be credited to reduce fees for facility or programs.

3. FORMALIZE CO-ORDINATION

a. Community leaders who are responsible for outreach and the development of strategies that enhance natural supports should be compensated. Volunteers recruited through strategies should be recognized.

b. The level of volunteer vs. professional leadership should be evaluated according the skills required for the task. For example, volunteers are competent in general activities such as community dinners/entertainment. More skilled leadership may be required for other activities.

c. The focus of natural supports and naturally supportive environments is on primary prevention, or primary supports. They will not completely address specialized needs - for example the needs of a youth with serious mental health concerns must be met with professional supports.

d. The investments in prevention and community need to attend to the described barriers of participation including cost, location, time, relevance and perceived value.

4. SPECIFIC STRATEGY CONSIDERATIONS

a. Develop a shared vision - what can people come together around.

b. Duration of effort - evidence suggests community programs of 6 to 9 months are optimal for skill development and building relationships.

c. Planning for integration - events that involve everyone (see above).

d. Consider a broad range of partners - small business, school, police, recreation, seniors, organizations, cultural experts, etc.

e. Build on existing resources, including Big Brothers Big Sisters, Girl Guides, and Scouts which have established processes for skill development.

f. Develop a strategy that emphasizes and recognizes the value of participation and/or service learning.

5. INTERGENERATIONAL ACTIVITIES

a. There is an opportunity to pilot intergenerational activities, particularly the engagement of seniors with children and youth.

6. AUDIENCE SPECIFIC APPROACHES

a. Evidence suggests that both audience specific and general approaches are warranted. Specific groups, including LGBTQ2+, Newcomers, Refugees, Immigrants, Vulnerable Families may require more targeted, longer duration approaches.

b. Consider some specific emphasis on vulnerable groups. Natural supports can especially impact the lives of those children, youth, and families who have experienced adversity and trauma; this includes Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are defined as abuse, neglect and household dysfunction that occur during childhood.²⁶ Supportive, reciprocal relationships can contribute to healthier behavioral and psychosocial development in children and youth. For example, youth within the child welfare system who had natural supports were 13% less likely to participate in antisocial behaviours, such as assault and theft, compared to youth without supports.²⁷

c. General activities which are free, periodic, and intergenerational are effective in building relationships, and in engaging volunteers (e.g. pot-luck dinner, movie night).

7. SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

- a. Social media may be a vehicle to communicate about activities, and to recruit volunteers.
- b. Social media may be a vehicle to interact and build trust with those most vulnerable because it provides a level of anonymity.

8. DESCRIBED ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

- a. Campaigns that provide people with easy, brief opportunities to act as supports would be helpful - both in prompting action and in changing culture.
- b. Identify natural support champions who may be unaware of their influence, such as bus drivers, mail carriers, dog walkers and local businesses and create opportunities for engagement.
- c. Expand/modify strategies that optimize development with a view to 'how can natural supports be emphasized.'
- d. Consider innovative approaches to recognizing contribution and participation. For example, could volunteer time credits be applied to reduce program or access fees? Could participation be recognized through gift certificates or other relevant benefits?

9. DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION

- a. Consider metrics for evaluation such as components of the Middle Years Development Instrument.¹⁵
- b. Consider including process measures, and participation measures in evaluations, particularly in the early years.
- c. Take a long view towards positive change and consider assessing attitudes and beliefs, as well as behaviours.

SUMMARY

Strategic investments to enhance natural supports in community settings can mitigate the influence of adversity on children, youth and families.

Low cost preventive approaches that are universal and/or targeted at a community level have a positive return on investment because they reduce the likelihood of behavioural and developmental problems associated with exposure to adversity.

Successful community approaches require investment in leadership and co-ordination to leverage contributions by volunteers and local businesses. Strategic plans that include opportunities for skill development, including art, recreation, and leadership can enhance competency in vulnerable children and youth and create equity. Community specific intergenerational, cross-cultural, as well as cultural and population specific approaches can enhance child and youth competency, contributing to the development of a civic society.

“ The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies of which they were born.”²⁸

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