



Community Vitality and Children

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Introduction

Healthy and vital communities are a macrocosm of healthy families, individuals and children. Society needs to invest in the well-being of individuals in order to create sustainable, healthy communities. Investing in the well-being of children is fundamental; research demonstrates that children growing up in healthy, supportive families and communities are more likely to be healthy and stable in adulthood. According to the Child and Youth Well-Being Index (CWI), performance in terms of children's well-being reflects the strength of our institutions: its families, schools and communities (Land, K., 2010). As made explicit by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, "the promotion of the rights of the child is important for its own sake as well as being a critical investment in the future of society" (UNICEF, 2007. p. 40). Rees defines well-being as "a holistic state that includes psychological, physical, spiritual, social and cultural contentment and welfare...that incorporates both a public/social standard, as well as a personal/private viewpoint" (Bernhard et. al, n.d., p. 7). Individual well-being is

affected by factors such as gender, ethnicity, class background, racialization, social and economic security, life cycle, age, mental and physical health and presence of young children (Bernhard et al, n.d.). The well-being of children is impacted by a variety of key elements including the built environment and the quality of the family's residential neighborhood, family income, education, family stability and emotional support, a family's access to social capital and the quality of interactions with others. Investing in the key elements that support the well-being of children will not only increase the quality of children's lives, but will also help to increase the vitality of their community.

Children and Poverty

In Canada, the prevalence of poverty among children is extremely high; over the past decade the poverty rate for Canada's children has risen to 1 in 5 (McIntyre et. al, 2000). Families in Canada that experience poverty are likely to experience hunger and live in poor quality neighborhoods, dramatically impacting the well-being of families and children. Furthermore, current research illustrates that family economic conditions are tied to educational achievement; children from low-income families are at greater risk of experiencing low test scores in childhood, grade failing, disengagement with learning, and dropping out of school (Duncan et. al, 1998; Baker et al, 2005; Huston et al, 2001). First, we turn to the issue of poverty and hunger among low-income families in Canada.

A survey of children and youth conducted by McIntyre et. al (2000) discusses the prevalence of hunger among Canadian children and looks at the coping strategies used by families. The study illustrates how hunger is more prevalent among single-parent families, families relying on social assistance and off-reserve Aboriginal families. The study also revealed that it is common for parents to deprive themselves of food in order to feed their children or for children living in poor conditions to skip meals or eat less (McIntyre et al., 2000). Other coping strategies can include seeking support from relatives or from food banks. However, food banks are reported to be a poor source of nutrition due to being often inaccessible, the food being low in nutritional quality and of variable supply. Hunger is connected with a diversity of outcomes including poor health among mothers and children and activity limitation (Ibid). Parents experiencing hunger are also more likely than other primary caregivers to report daily cigarette use as a means to reduce stress as well as act an appetite suppressant. However, alcohol use is reported to be significantly higher among primary caregivers who do not experience family hunger (McIntyre, 2000). Poverty often begets poverty, putting people into a vicious cycle, thus, it is government's self interest to ensure that social policies and support systems are in place to assist families potentially at risk of experiencing hunger, never mind other issues such as self-esteem and autonomy. Low-income families are also likely to live in poor quality neighborhoods, impacting the overall well-being of families and children.

The quality of neighborhoods and the built environment can impact the well-being of children on a variety of levels. Linkages have been made between child outcomes and the quality of neighborhoods; better quality neighborhoods generally correlate to higher levels of child well-being. Research has demonstrated that lower quality neighborhoods can be connected to

poorer outcomes for children (Curtis et. al, 1999). This can be due to the fact that lower quality neighborhoods generally have fewer public parks and green space, lower quality public schools in terms of the same access to resources, less recreational facilities and fewer after school programs, higher unemployment and poverty rates and higher rates of crime. Unsafe community conditions can create stress or anxiety for parents and parental stress can have a negative impact on the well-being of the child (Ibid), another vicious trap. Safer neighborhoods have been documented as correlated with fewer emotional or behavior disorders among children. Within the inner-city context, contact with nature and green space may increase children's self-discipline (Taylor et al., 2002) and may positively affect their performance at school. Municipal planners need to design communities equitably, ensuring that poor and culturally diverse neighborhoods are treated equally with regards to municipal investment including investments in public facilities, parks, play areas for children, public transportation, farmers' markets, public art and public spaces, all features necessary for vital communities. Next, we turn to the relationship between income poverty and educational achievement among children.

Studies have illustrated that parental socioeconomic income and status correlates with measures of both child and adult achievement (Huston et. al, 2001; Duncan et. al, 1998). The relationship between family economic conditions and achievement is especially strong among children in low-income families. Furthermore, socioeconomic conditions in early childhood have been noted among researchers to be key factors related to finishing schooling (Huston et al., 2001). Income poverty within the family structure has been documented to have a strong relationship with a low level of preschool ability and has been associated with low test scores later in childhood as well as grade failing, disengagement with learning, and dropping out of school. Studies have illustrated that, "early cognitive and physical development suggest that family income in the first five years of life is a powerful correlate of developmental outcomes in early and middle childhood" (Duncan et al., 1998, p. 407). Research illustrates that low family income and chronic poverty relates to children's health, in particular, intellectual functioning, academic achievement, social behavior, and psychological well-being, as well as to adult educational and economic attainment (Huston et al., 2001).

Huston et al. (2001) discuss how a family's socioeconomic conditions can be impacted by events such as divorce and unemployment. Unemployment in general increases stress, this is especially the case for single mothers whose income often drops more than the male as a function of separation and divorce. Other studies have demonstrated that low family income can create economic stress within the family that can lead to conflict between parents (Conger et al., 1997). Stress experienced by parents can impact the entire family thereby negatively affecting the well-being of children. Government funded after school programs can be a way to reduce stress for low-income parents. Moreover, Huston discusses how participation in formal after-school care programs that provide cognitive stimulation and supportive interactions with adults can increase academic performance and is associated with lower levels of behavioral problems among children (Huston et al., 2001). Behavioral problems and poor adjustment becomes a higher risk for children without adult supervision during out of school hours, especially if they live in low-income, unsafe neighborhoods

(Marshall et al., 1997). Huston et al. (2001) further discuss how anti-poverty programs that provide support for combining work and family responsibilities can greatly benefit the development of school-age children. Social policies that focus on the importance of increasing the incomes of poor families can also enhance the abilities and achievements of children, “most important appears to be the elimination of deep and persistent poverty during a child's early years (Duncan et al., 1998, p. 421).

Next we turn to the relationship between children and violence.

Children and Violence

Vital communities are places where people feel safe and a community's vitality may well rest on how safe its most vulnerable inhabitants feel—the elderly and the young. Freedom from violence is a social imperative for all members of a community. The young are especially vulnerable, as the following childhood sexual abuse statistics reveal:

- 1 in 3 females and 1 in 6 males in Canada experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18;
- 80% of all child abusers are the father, foster father, stepfather or another relative or close family friend of the family;
- 60-80% of offenders in a study of imprisoned rapists have been molested as children;
- 80% of prostitutes and juvenile delinquents, in another study, were sexually abused as children. (National Advisory Council of Women, quoted by University of Victoria's Sexual Assault Centre);
- almost 40% of women assaulted by spouses said their children witnessed the violence against them (either directly or indirectly) and in many cases the violence was severe (Statistics Canada, 2006); and
- children who are exposed to physical violence in their homes are more than twice as likely to be physically aggressive as those who have not (McCreary Centre Society, 1999).

These statistics demonstrate that violence is a widespread social problem in modern society and significant efforts need to be instigated in order to reduce violence, thereby improving the quality of life of children (and women). We need to build and support social policies, programs and after school care programs that are committed to reducing violence and caring for children and youth who are at risk or are experiencing violence directly. Educational practitioners need to be trained in order to have the tools and knowledge to deal with violence that occurs within the school system. Significant research and policy attention needs to be devoted to inculcating widespread cultural values and norms against all forms of violence in communities in order to break the vicious cycle of violence described by the above data.

We now turn to another key consideration, families living without full legal status and its impacts on children.

Families Living Without Full Legal Status in Canada

As previously mentioned, the individual stress of one family member can affect the well-being of the entire family, particularly in male-dominated heads of households. Well-being plays a critical role in the ability for a new immigrant family to be able to adapt and integrate within their new environment. Families or parents living with precarious legal status in Canada usually experience high levels of stress that impacts the overall well-being of children and families. The questions around status, rights and entitlements can be uncertain for individuals who are not Canadian citizens or are not-yet-citizen refugees and immigrants. “In some cases, even citizens may encounter difficulty in accessing and obtaining services and protections to which they are entitled by virtue of their citizenship. This latter situation is not uncommon, for example, among Canadian-born children whose parents have uncertain legal status. Although recognized as citizens by birth, they may face barriers in accessing education and other entitlements” (Bernhard et. al, n.d., p.1). A report by Berinstein et al. (n.d.) discusses the sense of daily fear experienced by non-status person (Ibid). Incidents of depression, high rates of domestic violence among non-status women, lack of access to various services often due to extremely demanding job situations, unemployment, under-employment and discrimination is common among non-status persons. Other main challenges to well-being during the settlement process for individuals include language barriers and fear to obtain access to services due to the need to stay below the radar of government authorities. Non-status families tend to have limited access to social capital, limiting their overall support network and thereby increasing overall vulnerability and alienation and access to the benefits of a wider community. Moreover, “families with uncertain status who have children must make difficult choices with respect to livelihood in order to be able to care for their children” (Bernhard et. al, n.d., p.2).

There has not been much research on the well-being of families and children living without full legal status in Canada particularly due to the challenges that stem from working with “invisible people” or people who want to remain unknown to government authorities. In Canada, there currently is no official statistic on this population. However, Canada is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and, is, therefore obliged to ensure the needs of children are being met and respected, regardless of their legal status. It is of critical importance that policies and social programs are implemented to meet the needs of families and children living without full legal status in Canada. Training programs and support needs to be provided to educators and service providers in order to ensure that they have the tools necessary to help and support non-status families and children to gain greater autonomy, access to community services. Most importantly, policies must be put in place to address the under-employment of professionals who are admitted to this country and subsequently because of accreditation barriers not allowed to work in their professions.

We now examine the impacts of bullying, depression and anxiety on the well-being of children.

Depression and Anxiety Among Children

There is a general consensus in the literature that bullying and victimization is experienced frequently by children. "Bullying is defined as involving: an imbalance of strength (either physical or psychological); a negative physical or verbal action; a deliberate intention to hurt another; and it is repeated over time" (Craig, 1997, p.1).

Research on bullying and victimization has traditionally focused on overt aggression, however researchers are beginning to observe a socially oriented form of aggression and victimization (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). "In contrast to physical aggression, which harms others through physical damage or the threat of such damage", examples of indirect aggression include aggression "against a peer by excluding her from one's peer group"; or "threatening to withdraw a friendship" (Craig, 1997, p.123). Sex differences are less pronounced in this more inclusive definition of aggression. Girls are more likely to use indirect aggression than physical aggression as a mechanism to enforce power. Researchers theorize that this might be due to the fact that indirect aggression damages goals that are of particular importance for girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). As well, there may be socialization factors at work as it is more socially acceptable for male children to use physical aggression than female children (Dale, unpublished paper). Depression and anxiety is directly connected to bullying and victimization and sadly, suicide rates.

Silverman, La Greca & Wassterin (1995) discuss that the fundamental component of anxiety relates to a repeated exposure to the stimuli in which an individual learns that there is potential for danger or harm. Consequently, anxiety results from repeated exposure to bullying and victimization that can lead to physical or psychological harm. Of particular note, Silverman et al. (1995) found that indirect aggression, including personal harm or attack by others, was the most frequent and intense worry of children in grades two through six (Craig, 1997). Moreover, children worries included rejection and exclusion from group activities, being ignored by peers, and betrayal. Children that are victims to bullying and victimization and at higher risks of experiencing depression and higher levels of anxiety. Thus, efforts need to be made within the school system and after school programs to encourage compassionate interactions among children and address bullying and victimization. By minimizing bullying and victimization in the school system, the educational experience will be more fulfilling and nourishing for children and will potentially increase the ability for children to succeed at school.

Another emerging concern is cyberspace bullying and victimization, and there have been a number of very tragic suicides of young people ranging from the age of 10 to 15 over the past year (2011) in the province of Ontario. This may be an invidious and covert form of bullying that is more difficult to address, unless the entire community begins to open up community dialogue and political leaders speak up against bullying and violence, as recently done by Premier Dalton McGinty in the province of Ontario. A community's vitality is also dependent upon open dialogue, voices that are not afraid to speak up on contentious issues and political leaders who create the space for that dialogue to occur free from fear of political correctness. It takes a community to raise a child, and when there are norms and values about the

meaning of the good society, the well-being of all individuals, and particularly children, is increased. Perhaps it is now the time to begin dialogues around government policies and educational policies of zero tolerance for violence, including bullying and victimization against children, women and other species to develop common values and norms of behaviour that are acceptable by the community.

Conclusion

Communities need to ensure that investments and policy directions valuing younger people and their well-being are in place in order to address current inequities in Canadian society. Vital communities are compassionate communities that value and protect the more vulnerable members of society and attempt to address inequities of access. Values such as spatial justice that recognize the differential impacts of the built environment and design of residential neighborhoods between lower and higher income families, early education programs and family support programs that attempt to redress differential family income, education, family stability are key to ensuring the long-term vitality of a community and the security of all its residents. Access and quality of social capital and spaces to have diverse interactions with others is another key feature of community vitality and the well-being of its children. Communities need to focus on examining these critical issues, beginning dialogues that show children that they are valued members of a community, and ideally by opening up the space for these critical conversations, begin to actively address issues of abuse, violence, bullying and aggression towards the more vulnerable and less powerful.

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