

Improving Child and Youth Mental Health Care

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Doctors of BC Position

Doctors of BC recognizes the need for coordinated and collaborative approaches that incorporate prevention and early intervention strategies to support child and youth mental health. Doctors of BC recommends that the provincial government, in collaboration with children and youth with lived experience and partners from across health, social, and education sectors:

1. Develop a child and youth mental health framework outlining a system of care that includes tangible targets and measures to improve access to timely, effective, and culturally safe care, including navigational and transitional supports and services.
2. Develop a concrete action plan with sufficient and sustainable funding and resourcing to implement the prevention and early intervention commitments outlined in the Mental Health in Schools Strategy and the BC's Population and Public Health Framework.

To support physicians in providing child and youth mental health care, Doctors of BC commits to:

1. Continuing to work with the provincial government and other key partners to ensure physician perspectives are considered when developing policies and programs related to the provision of child and youth mental health care.
2. Continuing to engage with physicians on their perspectives on child and youth mental health care to identify where clinical supports and resources can be improved, and raising physician awareness of relevant resources, services, and programs.

Background

Ten years ago, Doctors of BC released its policy paper [Reaching Out: Supporting Youth Mental Health in British Columbia](#) (1), which outlined key areas to improve access to care. Despite provincial efforts to enhance the mental health and well-being of children and youth, BC is facing a mental health crisis.

In BC, an estimated 95,000 children and youth are likely experiencing mental health disorders at any given time, and of these, only about half receive any help (2). Since 2013, there has been a rise in self-reported anxiety, ADHD, and suicidal ideation among this population and a 20% decrease in positive mental health ratings (3).

Childhood to adolescence is a crucial time to intervene, as this is the period where the first

onset of a mental health disorder can occur (4). If left untreated, mental health disorders can negatively impact an individual's ability to navigate social norms, lead to poor education outcomes, affect employment capabilities, and/or involvement with the justice system (5).

The current mental health system for children and youth in BC is not working. This policy statement builds on our previous paper and calls on the BC Government to re-evaluate the current structure and services for child and youth mental health and establish a coordinated and sustainable system of care.

Mental health refers to the overall state of an individual's psychological and emotional well-being; it exists on a continuum and is a changing state (6).

Analysis

Improving Access to Timely, Safe, and Inclusive Care

Since 2014, emergency room visits by youth for mental health issues have increased by 75% (4). This rise can be attributed to a lack of timely access to community services, youth not knowing where to seek help, limitations in services offered, and the long wait times—often up to a year—for diagnosis and effective interventions. Improving access to mental health care for children and youth is essential, as timely support can significantly impact their well-being and development. This requires addressing existing barriers to care including systemic inequities and system navigation challenges.

Many children and youth experience systemic inequities that contribute to challenges in accessing appropriate care and services. This includes Indigenous and immigrant youth, those who are transitioning out of care, those who identify as LGBTQ2s+, youth who have a severe mental illness or co-existing conditions, and those who have developmental or other disabilities. There is a need for accessible treatment for youth with concurrent or severe and often unpreventable mental illnesses. Our policy paper *Improving Substance Use Care and Prevention in BC* speaks to the need for a framework on child and youth substance use care (7). Children and youth with neurodevelopmental conditions are also more likely to experience mental health issues. (8) As such, it is crucial that supports and services are not only effective and safe, but also inclusive for children and youth.

The current system of mental health care in BC is complex and uncoordinated. Child and youth mental health care falls under the shared responsibility of several ministries, including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Children and Family Development, and the Ministry of Education and Childcare, which has led to fragmentation and

inefficiencies, including a lack of accountability, collaboration, and data-sharing (9) (10).

To ensure children, youth, and their families can access care and services when and where they need, there is need to increase collaborative care environments with partners from a wide range of disciplines including physicians, nurses, social workers, counselors, psychologists and educators.

Doctors of BC calls on the BC Government to develop a child and youth mental health framework outlining a system of care that includes tangible targets and measures to improve access to timely, effective, and culturally safe care, including navigational and transitional supports. The development of this framework should be done through meaningful engagement with key partners, including children and youth with lived experience and Indigenous peoples to ensure Indigenous approaches to care are incorporated.

Prioritizing Prevention and Early Intervention

It is imperative to prevent mental health issues from arising and, if they do occur, to address them as early as possible through improved access and effective interventions.

Prevention and early intervention strategies can reduce the number of children and youth who may develop a mental health disorder and proactively identify mental health issues at an early stage. Prevention strategies should incorporate parents and caregivers, as they play a critical role in shaping the mental health and emotional development of children.

Doctors of BC commends the BC Government on its commitments outlined in the *Population and Public Health Framework*, including increasing equitable access to prenatal services, preventing

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adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)¹, fostering positive childhood experiences, promoting mental wellness in schools, and increasing mental well-being and early detection and the early intervention measures outlined in the *Mental Health in Schools Strategy* (11) (12).

While the prevention and early intervention vision discussed in these strategies are promising, clarity on how these goals will be achieved is needed. As such, a concrete action plan should be developed in collaboration with key partners that includes sufficient and sustainable funding and resourcing to implement the government's prevention and early intervention commitments. This includes the need for a coordinated approach to universal and targeted prevention initiatives to prioritize, promote, and protect the mental health and well-being of children and youth in BC.

History

This policy builds on our 2014 Policy Paper, [Reaching Out: Supporting Youth Mental Health in British Columbia](#).

References

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¹ [The Divisions of Family Practice have developed a toolkit for practitioners on incorporating ACEs into clinical practice](#).

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