



Research Brief

# Healthy Children, Healthy Nations: Family Policy, Cultural Vitality and Economic Growth

*A 15 by 15 Research Brief by the Aboriginal Steering Committee*

“Nothing is more important to our communities than for our children to be given the best environment in which to grow, thrive and prosper,” noted Grand Chief Ed John following a July 2008 gathering of First Nations Chiefs from across B.C. Chief John’s comments reflect a broad understanding among Aboriginal Peoples of the inherent links between healthy children and healthy Nations. This understanding places children at the centre of Aboriginal Peoples’ work towards self-determination and self-sufficiency, with respect for their own spiritual values, histories, languages, territories, political institutions and ways of life.

In this brief, we show how this understanding guides the family policy recommendations of the Human Early Learning Partnership in its report, 15 by 15: a Comprehensive Policy Framework for Early Human Capital Investment; and why these same recommendations should command attention from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Peoples in order to motivate senior levels of government to adopt family policy that promotes healthy children and healthy Nations for minority and majority.

Across British Columbia today, 29% of kindergarten-aged children do not meet the developmental benchmarks they need to thrive now and into the future, including 49% of Aboriginal children.

As a result, most B.C. neighbourhoods and school districts experience rates of developmental vulnerability that are higher than the Government of B.C.’s 15 by 15 goal of reducing vulnerability across the province to 15% by fiscal year 2015/16. All

but a handful of neighbourhoods report early vulnerability levels that exceed the maximum 10% rate which can be explained biologically.

## **THE ECONOMIC COSTS OF CHILD VULNERABILITY: A STRATEGIC FOCUS**

Reducing early vulnerability is vitally important because the consequences are serious for children, for their families and communities, and for the social and economic health of all in the province. The current vulnerability rate signals that B.C. now tolerates an unnecessary brain drain that will cost 20% in GDP growth over the span of our children’s lives. This is equivalent to throwing away from the economy today \$401.5 billion, along with the interest it would earn over 60 years. The economic cost of early vulnerability is 10 times the cumulative provincial debt, about 12 times the annual value of B.C.’s exports, and more than 40 times the yearly contributions to our economy from the high tech industry.

## Did you know?

There is substantial variation in the vulnerability rate among young Aboriginal children across B.C. school districts.

Some districts report that as few as 17% of Aboriginal children do not meet age appropriate benchmarks when they start school – well below the provincial rate – while other school districts report that early vulnerability limits opportunities for as many as 71% of Aboriginal children.

This variation invites important discussions about what makes some places in B.C. relatively better for Aboriginal children than others.

We know these economic costs of early vulnerability because of groundbreaking research conducted at B.C.'s Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP). Guided by a strong Steering Committee of Aboriginal community members from across the province, HELP's research shows that young children who are not school ready are less likely to be job ready and less likely to contribute positively to the health and economic well-being of their communities.

*"We understand these are extraordinary economic times. Yet this makes it all the more important that we invest immediately in First Nations, especially in youth. If we do not, the gap between First Nations citizens and other Canadians will grow, as will unemployment, creating downward pressure on productivity coupled with upward pressure on social expenditures and programs. All Canadians will suffer and all Canadians will pay for it."*

**Shawn Atleo**

National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations  
Globe and Mail, February 21, 2010

Although public policy has traditionally prioritized investments in post-secondary education and job skills training to promote a skilled workforce, HELP's research confirms an international consensus: the most cost-effective human capital interventions occur among young children.

The Human Early Learning Partnership is currently featuring this economic evidence as part of a strategy to mobilize interest in family policy investments among

nontraditional stakeholders. For decades, there have been strong social justice and rights-based arguments in favour of supporting families with children to reduce early vulnerability, including those articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. But these arguments have not influenced public or political opinion sufficiently to achieve the necessary policy changes. In response, HELP's 15 by 15 report makes the business case for reducing early child vulnerability in expectation that this argument will have more influence around Treasury Tables in governments across Canada.

## WHY ARE B.C. CHILDREN VULNERABLE?

For the population overall, vulnerability levels at kindergarten reflect that family policy is out of step with current social and economic trends. For example, assumptions about women as homemakers and men as bread winners are outdated today because most mothers participate in the workforce. Despite this change, high rates of child and family poverty persist, casting doubt on traditional expectations that jobs guarantee a path out of poverty. While juggling earning with caring is now the norm for most parents, access to quality early learning and child care services has not kept pace with the overall growth in employment.

These socioeconomic trends mean that many families today lack the time, resources and/or community services to help them balance their caring and earning responsibilities. Although the poor are more statistically likely to be vulnerable, the majority of vulnerable children in B.C. reside across the larger middle-and upper-class where lack of time to care personally and lack of access to community supports and services are key issues. Early vulnerability is a population problem – not a problem of a particular income or cultural group.

For Aboriginal communities, child vulnerability levels reflect additional

challenges posed by the legacies of colonization. Land taken without Treaty, along with the reserve system, constrained access to resources and income for Aboriginal Peoples. Simultaneously, a range of government decisions resulted in the separation of children from family and community. These legacies mean that family policy is not simply out of step with current trends for Aboriginal families. Rather, governments purposefully designed policy to disrupt family and community caregiving in order to undermine First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples, as acknowledged in the Government of Canada's 2008 apology for the Indian Residential School system. The impact of that system is still reflected in the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system today.

Given their history, Aboriginal communities across B.C. and the country have particular wisdom about what is at stake when family time, resources and community caregiving supports are compromised. Guided by this wisdom, HELP recommends family policy changes to address all three areas: time, resources and community services.

## **THE 15 BY 15 POLICY FRAMEWORK**

### **Time Recommendations**

- Build on maternity and parental leave to enrich the benefit value, and to extend the total duration from 12 to 18 months, reserving additional months for fathers in common law and marriage relationships with birth mothers. Ensuring equitable access to benefits among low income families is a priority.
- Build on existing employment standards to support mothers and fathers with children over 18 months to work full-time for pay, but redefine full-time to accommodate shorter annual working hours without adding gender inequalities in the labour market.

## **Fighting Misrecognition**

The collection of Early Development Instrument (EDI) data in British Columbia can promote language recognition in support of Nation re-building. Of the 3,284 Aboriginal children included in the EDI in 2008/09, kindergarten teachers identified just 142 as belonging to a traditional language group. This recognition rate of 4.3% is woefully low relative to the rate of language recognition for other minority ethno cultural language communities in the province, which trend closer to 100%. In response, EDI data collection in the future will invite teachers in all districts across the province to consider the specific traditional language group(s) to which the Aboriginal children in their kindergarten classes belong. This sets the stage for Aboriginal children, caregivers and communities to demand greater recognition of their membership in traditional language communities, while also encouraging sensitivity to the problems of misrecognition among the majority.

### **Resource Recommendations**

- Build on income support policies to reduce poverty among families with children.

### **Service Recommendations**

- Build on pregnancy, health and parenting supports to ensure monthly developmental monitoring opportunities for children from birth through age 18 months, as their parents are on leave. Ensure that the developmental monitoring is respectful of, and



responsive to, minority cultural priorities, values and traditions.

- Build on early education and care services to provide a seamless transition for families as the parental leave period ends in order make quality services for children age 19 months to kindergarten affordable and available on a full-or part-time basis, as parents choose. Such services must explicitly counter the legacy of the Residential Schools by integrating local First Nations and Métis values, traditions, knowledge and caregivers.
- Build on the work of local ECD coalitions in community planning to enhance program coordination between all local services that support families with children from birth to age six. Ensure local ECD coalitions are led, meaningfully engaged with, and/or adequately represented by local Aboriginal stakeholder groups.

A \$3 billion annual investment is required to pay for the 15 by 15 Family Policy Framework. Half of the \$3 billion investment will support families directly to enjoy more time and resources to care personally, while the other half will strengthen community services on and off reserves. For families particularly at risk of involvement with the child welfare system, HELP's recommendations would provide greater income security to reduce the chances of children suffering from physical neglect, as well as early learning and child care options that support vulnerable families to stay together through times of crisis while parents access needed services.

These six policy recommendations are required to promote healthy children for healthy Nations among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations, generating economic returns that surpass the investment costs by a ratio of 6-to-1.

Rarely do social justice and economic growth find common cause. They do in smart family policy to reduce child vulnerability. The Aboriginal Steering Committee at HELP hopes this information will assist B.C. Aboriginal leaders in encouraging all levels of government to implement family policy reforms that promote Nation re-building and sustainable economic growth today, while reducing early child vulnerability for the seven generations that follow.

*"I am and always will be a strong advocate for my People. I believe that we - especially our children - must be viewed holistically. I firmly believe that the Human Early Learning Partnership and the EDI tool is one of the very few research projects/tools that we have that helps us to identify where and what the gaps may be in our children's development. This research will therefore help us to put in place appropriate programs to address those gaps."*

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