



## Northern Health Guiding Principles for Early Childhood Development

Northern Health wants to increase health and wellness and improve quality of life by supporting families to raise healthy children and promote early childhood development (ECD). The importance of ECD should be recognized in a population health perspective. This may be achieved by working with individuals and community partners to promote the following guiding principles in ECD:

- Support healthy policy, programs and services aimed at improving ECD.
- Support expectant mothers to be healthy before and during pregnancy for positive birth outcomes.
- Raise awareness of the importance of attachment relationships developed between parent(s)/caregiver(s) and children in the early years of life.
- Support parent(s)/caregiver(s) with effective postnatal care.
- Support readiness for school.
- Support families beyond parental leave through to the beginning of schooling.

For further information, please refer to the complete Guiding Document on Early Childhood Development available on the Northern Health web site: [www.northernhealth.ca](http://www.northernhealth.ca) (About Us/Position Statements/Addressing Risk Factors), or by using the following address: <http://www.northernhealth.ca/AboutUs/PositionStatementsAddressingRiskFactors.aspx>

### Why is Early Childhood Development Important?

Child development is a foundation for community and economic development. Healthy early growth and development builds a strong foundation for success into the adult years and is required for responsible citizenship and economic productivity. The early years of development establish the foundation for competence and coping skills that affect learning, behaviour and health. Evidence suggests that many health problems experienced later in life are influenced by the conditions of early life (e.g., high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes and some mental health problems). Moreover, chronic conditions may be prevented or mitigated as early as preconception, prenatal and early childhood (e.g., obesity, anxiety and depression).

### Areas of Growth and Development

Multiple areas of growth and development occur through infancy and early childhood. These include:

- Physical health and well-being: physical development and refinement of coordination and motor skills.
- Social competence: development of social skills to get along with others and explore new things.
- Emotional maturity: emotional growth, including the expression of a range of emotions.
- Language and cognitive development: brain development and the capacity for learning (e.g., literacy, numeracy and memory use).
- Communication skills and general knowledge: development of skills to communicate one's own needs and understand others.

While these factors are listed independently, it is acknowledged that they are not independent from one another. Development in one area can support development in other areas.

## Planning for a Healthy Start

An important factor to consider in ECD is that some segments of the population may be statistically more vulnerable than others. For example, children with parents of lower incomes tend to demonstrate more vulnerability. However, while families of lower socioeconomic status are statistically more likely to be more vulnerable, children from families of moderate or higher socioeconomic status may still be vulnerable (Figure 1). This highlights the practice of providing universal and enhanced programming.

Figure 1: Vulnerable Children Across the Socioeconomic Scale



Adapted from Hertzman, nd.

### **Universal Programming**

Universal programs are more likely to capture vulnerable children across the socioeconomic status gradient. To be fully effective, universal programming must be high quality, inclusive of effective ECD programming and available for all of the early years.

### **Enhanced Programming**

Enhanced programming consists of smaller-scale programs that specifically target a group within the population (e.g., lower SES or children in care). Enhanced programs aim to help overcome specific barriers and are designed for the needs and capabilities of that specific group.

### **Combining Strengths**

Evidence suggests that some combination that draws from the strengths of universal and enhanced programming may be the most effective method to capture those children who are vulnerable across the SES gradients.

*Proportionate universality* supports the provision of programs, services and policies that are universal, but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage (e.g., Aboriginal groups require culturally appropriate programming).

## Why Develop Guiding Principles?

Much work for ECD has already been achieved within Northern Health (e.g., programming in four key areas: promoting healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy; improving parenting and family supports; strengthening ECD, learning and care; and strengthening community supports). The goal of stating these guiding principles is to develop a common understanding of the idealized approach and to build on existing efforts to continually work within this framework and towards these goals.